

STORYTELLING AS A MEANS OF BRAND BUILDING

– Building Authenticity and Emotions through Brand Stories

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to examine the arguments and benefits of storytelling in brand building, as well as explore the role of building authenticity and emotions through brand stories. The research project was implemented by examining four relatively small Finnish companies that cleverly exploit brand stories in different ways in their communication. Due to lack of previous research on the topic, the scope of the study was chosen to be from the company perspective. The study aimed to answer the following research questions: (1) How do small Finnish companies brand and differentiate themselves by creating “authentic” brand stories? (2) How is emotional branding exploited in these brand stories? (3) Why is storytelling viewed important?

The research methods of the study consisted of a semi-structured reflective interview as well as analysis on the sample companies’ websites and Instagram accounts. As an analysis method, thematic analysis was used to make sense of the collected data that included four interviews that were transcribed into a written form, together with the seven pages of notes concerning the companies’ websites, as well as the analysis of the 100 Instagram posts along with the analysis of the “Instagram Stories” from two weeks. Color-coding was utilized in order to identify repeating themes, similarities and differences, as well as naturally occurring transitions.

It could be concluded that the main findings of this graduate thesis are threefold. Firstly, five different themes (truthful brand story, real people, honesty and transparency, use of humor, and Finnishness) could be identified, through which small Finnish companies brand and differentiate themselves by creating authentic brand stories. Secondly, emotional branding is exploited by aiming to create (predetermined) emotions by appealing to consumers’ emotions together with promoting the company values. Thirdly, storytelling is viewed important, as it is a core of these companies differentiating them from their competitors by substantially increasing their brand awareness.

Keywords branding, emotional branding, brand story, storytelling, authenticity, brand authenticity, international business communication

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Tiivistelmä

Tutkimuksen päätavoitteena oli tutkia autenttisuuden rakentumista bränditarinoiden avulla. Lisäksi tavoitteena oli selvittää ”tunnebrändyksen” merkitystä tarinankerronnassa ja tarinankerronnan yleistä hyödyllisyyttä. Tutkimus toteutettiin tarkastelemalla neljää suhteellisen pientä suomalaisyritystä, jotka hyödyntävät tarinankerrontaa viestinnässään taitavasti. Tutkimukseen valittiin yritys näkökulma, koska monet aikaisemmat tutkimus-artikkelit käsitelivät tarinankerronnalla brändäämistä kuluttajan näkökulmasta. Tavoitteena oli vastata kolmeen tutkimuskysymykseen: (1) Miten suomalaiset pienyritykset erottautuvat ja brändäävät itseään luomalla ”autenttisia” bränditarinoita? (2) Miten ”tunnebrändäystä” hyödynnetään kyseisissä bränditarinoissa? (3) Miksi tarinankerronta koetaan hyödylliseksi?

Tutkimusmetodeina käytettiin puolistrukturoitua reflektointia haastattelua sekä analyysiä yritysten nettisivuista ja Instagram-tileistä. Analyysimetodina käytettiin temaattista analyysiä, jolla tulkittiin kerättyä materiaalia: neljä litteroitua haastattelua ja muistiinpanot nettisivuista sekä 100 Instagram-julkaisusta ja ”Instagram tarinoista”. Värikoodausta hyödynnettiin tunnistettaessa tutkimusmateriaalissa toistuvia teemoja, yhtäläisyyksiä ja erilaisuuksia sekä luonnollisia siirtymiä.

Tutkimustuloksina löydettiin viisi erilaista keinoa, joilla yritykset rakentavat autenttisuutta (todenperäinen bränditarina, oikeat ihmiset, rehellisyys ja läpinäkyvyys, huumori ja suomalaisuus). Yritykset hyödynsivät tunnebrändäystä yrittämällä luoda tiettyjä tunteita vedoten kuluttajien tunteisiin sekä tuomalla yrityksen arvoja esille bränditarinoissaan. Tarinankerronta koettiin lähes elinehtona suomalaisille pienyrityksille, sillä sen avulla ne erottautuivat kilpailijoistaan ja jäivät kuluttajien mieleen. Autenttisuudella ja tunnesiteiden muodostumisella oli myös suuri merkitys tarinankerronnan avulla brändäämisessä, sillä ne lujittivat kuluttajan kiintymystä yritykseen.

Avainsanat brändäys, tunnebrändäys, bränditarina, tarinankerronta, autenttisuus, kansainvälinen yritysviestintä

“The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller.”

– Steve Jobs (1955-2011)

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1 INTRODUCTION

“Those who tell the stories rule the world.”

(A Native American proverb.)

Stories have interested people throughout history, and it seems like people still want to believe in fairytales no matter how old they get (Lundqvist et al., 2012). Storytelling has its roots in oral traditions, and in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, in which cultural knowledge, myths, superstition, and religious and cosmological beliefs were spread and shared through speeches, anecdotes, and stories (Kent, 2015). Stories have remained important, and they are still nowadays an essential part of human life making everyday life more meaningful. In fact, stories are present everywhere, and not a day goes by without coming across a plethora of them (Rauhala & Vikström, 2014). People get exposed to different kinds of stories throughout their lives ever since they are born (van Laer et al., 2014). Stories have the ability to transport their audiences (van Laer et al., 2014), and as a result, one can end up anywhere in the world through the story and the use of one's imagination.

As stories are a powerful way to capture an audience's attention and interest, also businesses have realized the benefits of using them. According to van Laer et al. (2014) there are lots of examples of advertising, branding, communication, and consumer research on how companies as storytellers can benefit from telling stories either to their current customers or to their prospective customers. Storytelling is becoming a more and more

popular means of brand building, and it is not unusual for companies to use so-called brand stories in engaging with their customers (Huang, 2010, Lin & Chen, 2015, Lundqvist et al., 2012, etc.). Hence, in recent years, there has also been a growing interest in academic research of narratives as an important part of business communication, and more precisely their use in brand building.

Building and creating a strong brand, in fact, is what ultimately makes a company successful (Dahlén et al., 2010; Das et al., 2019; etc.), and communication without a doubt plays a crucial role in this. According to Holt (2004), the concept of “brand” consists of material markers (a name, a trademarked logo, unique packaging, design) as well as the meanings that form within customer experiences, advertisement, magazine evaluations, conversations, and such. Branding drives and influences consumers’ purchase decisions, and companies aim to achieve long-term customers by building lasting relationships between themselves and their consumers. In effect, one of the topmost goals for brands is to achieve brand commitment in today’s increasingly competitive and dynamic marketplace (Das et al., 2019).

There is an increasing amount of evidence that companies with an engaging brand story tend to be successful in creating strong and long lasting bonds between the brand and the consumers (Huang, 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2012; Rauhala & Vikström, 2014; Dahlén et al., 2010; etc.). Stories are used to create emotional connections and build up a relationship between the brand and the consumers (Huang, 2010). Particularly, being a strong brand requires an emotional tie between the brand and the consumer, and a story is a practical way to create that bond (Rauhala & Vikström, 2014). Moreover, brand stories are an excellent way for companies to differentiate their products from those of their competitors, because brand stories tend to have the power to invite the audience to use their own imagination and adapt to their specific needs and values (Lin & Chen, 2015).

1.1 Current Research

Several researchers have studied the concept of narrative transportation and its effect in branding and advertising (van Laer et al., 2014, Escalas, 2014). Narrative transportation is closely linked to storytelling and brand stories, and it means the phenomenon that occurs when a (brand) story is so compelling that the consumer gets mentally transported with it through the use of his imagination (van Laer et al., 2014). As storytelling has lately been seen as a more and more attractive and useful way to differentiate a brand from its competitors, researchers have also found it an interesting topic worth of exploration. A lot of the current research on storytelling and brand stories seems to focus on consumer perspective and consumer responses caused by a brand story. The following parts will capsuleize some of the applicable current research and its results briefly, which are later referred to in the Literature Review (see Chapter 2).

Consumers' brand perceptions are studied and measured in many different ways. The study of Lundqvist et al. (2012) investigates how a firm-oriented story influences consumers' brand experience by comparing two groups of consumers and their responses to an unknown brand with or without a brand story resulting in the favor of a well-crafted brand story. The studies of Huang (2010) and Ruy et al. (2019) revolve around the themes of examining the impact of the structure of a brand story including the story's authenticity, narrator, and plot, which all affect how the consumer perceives the brand image, and in which way the narrative transportation takes place. The study of Lin & Chen (2015), explores the influence of the typicality of a brand story and its role of getting consumers to be "hooked" on the brand. Brakus et al. (2009) aim to find out how consumers experience brands and how these brand experiences further affect consumers' behavior, and more precisely, Escalas (2004) researches how mental simulation and narrative transportation affect consumers' ad attitudes and brand evaluations. Brand stories seem to certainly have an impact on consumers and their perceptions of the brand.

In a more general level, van Laer et al. (2014) take a closer look at the concept of narrative transportation and its significance in consumer behavior through a quantitative meta-analysis. Moreover, the study of van Laer et al. (2019) examines narrative transportation and how it affects marketing literature in the current digital era, in which marketers increasingly and commonly use storytelling techniques to narratively transport and persuade their customers. On the contrary, a little bit is also investigated on storytelling from the point of view of the companies providing brand stories. Beverland's study (2005) investigates luxury winemakers, and how they create and re-create images of authenticity through brand stories and storytelling; and Harmeling et al. (2017) focus on defining engagement marketing, and offer a conclusion on how firms can strategically guide customer engagement in ways which will benefit their performance. All and all, it can be concluded that most of the current research seems to focus on the consumer perspective, and thus, there is a need to investigate the importance and role of storytelling in brand building more closely from the company perspective. My research on the use of brand stories from the company perspective will illustrate some of the ways that companies use storytelling and their reasoning behind it, having its emphasis on discovering the meaning of authenticity, and the desire to create emotions.

1.2 Research Objectives and Research Questions

My aim of this graduate thesis, thus, is to examine the arguments and benefits of storytelling in brand building from the company perspective, as well as explore the role of building authenticity and emotions through brand stories. The motivation for this study is to examine a timely and trendy topic that has not yet been studied extensively, especially from the point of view of the companies producing brand stories. I will build this study around examining a few relatively small Finnish companies that cleverly exploit brand stories in different ways in their communication. The goal is to enlighten the reasons why

these Finnish companies might find stories in their communication valuable, find common themes and elements in their stories, as well as investigate the possible link to Finnish and Nordic values, along with the role of authenticity in brand storytelling. As the study is implemented as a qualitative research, it does not pursue to find the “absolute truth” or statistically representative findings, but rather to grasp the phenomenon of using brand stories. The study builds on the following research questions: *(1) How do small Finnish companies brand and differentiate themselves by creating “authentic” brand stories? (2) How is emotional branding exploited in these brand stories? (3) Why is storytelling viewed important?* Thus, this thesis will be constructed around the themes of brand building, storytelling, emotional branding, “Finnishness” and “Nordicness”, and authenticity.

1.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. This introductory Chapter 1 has described the purpose of the study as well as given the background for it. It has very briefly talked about two of the main theoretic concepts, branding and storytelling, that will be the most important themes for this thesis, while the next chapter will dive deeper into them. Chapter 2 as the Literature Review, thus, introduces the main theoretic concepts of brand building and emotional branding, storytelling and narrative transportation, as well as authenticity and its significance in more detail. At the end of the chapter, I will also address social media, as it is certainly an important part, in some cases even the most important channel, of today’s brands’ storytelling. Chapter 3 then outlines the data and methods used in this thesis, as well as introduces the sample and discusses the trustworthiness of the study. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to present the findings, which are then further discussed and compared with the current research and literature in Chapter 5. The final chapter, Chapter 6, will conclude the research and bring forward the limitations of the study as well as introduce some suggestions for further research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the main concepts useful for this thesis and thus provide a comprehensive view on branding and storytelling and their linkage, as well as argue their importance in creating a successful brand. Additionally, the role of authenticity is discussed, and more precisely its significance for brands and storytelling. The Literature Review is divided into six sections. In the first section, the concepts of brands and branding are defined. The section aims to demonstrate what branding is, where it has its roots, how it is used nowadays, and why it should be reviewed as an important function for companies. The first part of the Literature Review also illustrates some of the reasons for consumers to consume certain brands, and introduces the concept of emotional branding, which will be substantive for the linkage to storytelling and brand stories. The second section, hereby, considers storytelling and brand stories, and introduces the concept of narrative transportation that is more or less extensively discussed in academic articles related to brand stories. The third section addresses the elements that are thought to construct a successful and effective brand story elaborating on the concepts of authenticity, narrator, and plot. The fourth section defines authenticity in more detail reflecting its role and significance in constructing and consuming brand stories. This section also taps into the concept of “Finnishness”, and ponders its relevance for the Finnish companies and their brand stories. Lastly, this literature review centralizes on branding on social media, and more precisely on constructing brand stories on Instagram. Finally, the theoretical framework for this thesis is introduced in one, short chapter, including all the main concepts relevant for this research.

2.1 Brands and Branding

“Every society needs myths – simple stories that help people deal with tensions in their lives. Today’s most potent brands succeed by providing them.”

(Holt, 2003, 43).

Branding is the driving force of marketing, and the central focus of marketing communications (Dahlén et al., 2010). It is difficult to imagine a world without brands and branding, as they are the main resource for differentiating a company from its competitors. Oxford University’s dictionary of media and communication defines “branding” as “the marketing processes by which a company, product, or service acquires a distinctive identity in the minds of consumers—becoming associated with particular values, lifestyles, and meanings” (Chandler & Munday, 2016). The concept of a “brand” can be defined to be both the physical attributes of the product or the company, such as its name, logo, packaging and design, slogan, etc., as well as the communication occurring around the brand within customer experiences, advertisement, magazine evaluations, conversations, and brand promises (Holt, 2004; Dahlén et al. 2010). Brand can also be thought as “a collection of images, thoughts and feelings in a person’s mind” (Garg et al., 2018, 138), or sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses that crystallize the brand (Brakus et al., 2009). Mumby (2013, 285-286) emphasizes that a brand can be defined by being “a constructed set of meanings that a company attaches to a particular product,” and those meanings and qualities can be almost anything. Moreover, it can be said that a brand comes into existence when various so-called authors, such as companies, the culture industries, intermediaries (such as critics and retail salespeople), and customers, tell stories that involve the specific brand (Holt, 2004).

The phenomenon of branding can be thought to have first occurred in the 1800s right after industrialization, when branding products was the main way for salesmen to develop customer loyalty and increase their customer base. Quickly after, branding transformed into a way to create new customer needs instead of only satisfying the existing ones. (Mumby, 2013) That is accurate for today's branding as well – as companies aim to constantly generate new needs for consumers, whether it would be simply the same old product in a different color or size. Additionally, branding is about creating value, either perceived or actual, over and above the practical functions of products (Dahlén et al., 2010). Companies have also realized that consumers do not only want to buy a certain branded product, but instead they are often looking to purchase from the particular company that is well branded (Mumby, 2013). Keller (2007) emphasizes that the heart of a great brand is invariably a great product, yet Mumby (2013) claims that image and meanings associated with the product, are much more important than the actual product itself. Holt (2004, 3-4) concludes: “Most successful brands become iconic brands meaning that they become the consensus expressions of particular values.”

Today's companies do not aim to get consumers to simply buy their products, but rather to commit into a relationship with the brand, in which the consumers can express their personalities and identities (Mumby, 2013). Consumers can use brands as a means of constructing their selves in various different ways; for instance, a brand can have symbolic value for the consumer, and make him look successful or family oriented in the eyes of others (Schembri & Merrilees, 2001). Brands can, thus, provide consumers with identity value acting as platforms for self-expression if brands embody the ideals consumers admire (Holt, 2004). Achieving brand commitment, where an emotional and relational bond is made between the consumer and the brand, and repeated purchases result from brand loyalty, is the ultimate goal for a brand operating in today's increasingly competitive marketplace (Dahlén et al., 2010; Das et al., 2019). Successful brands connect with consumers both functionally and emotionally (Dahlén et al., 2010), and branding can be

seen as active dialogue between the company and the consumer, rather than the company solely imposing its brand to a passive consumer (Mumby, 2013).

There are multiple different reasons why consumers consume certain brands. Branded products might be purchased for intrinsic reasons (e.g. because they do/do not contain certain ingredients) or extrinsic reasons (e.g. because they offer access into a certain group, help individuals to gain identity, etc.) (Dahlén et al. 2010). Garg et al. (2018) bring up four equity models that, according to them, great brands fall into: power (doing), identity (being), explorer (growing), and community (belonging). These different types of brands offer consumers' purchase decisions distinct motifs ranging from more emotional (identity and community) to more performance (power and explorer) based. It is noteworthy that successful brands do not often offer superior products, but instead they have managed to build a deep connection with culture and become part of people's lifestyle (Holt, 2003), thus creating consumption needs. In some cases, brand ethicality can also be a significant factor that increases consumers' passion towards certain brands and justifies their purchase decisions (Das et al. 2019). Consumers' choices of consuming certain goods make positive statements of who they already are as well as who they might want to become (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003). The classical theory of Belk (1988) claims that a consumer is, in fact, a sum of his possessions. Góbe (2001) stresses the emotional aspect of products and their distribution systems as the key difference that will direct consumers' ultimate purchase choice and the price they will be willing to pay for certain products. It is crucial that companies focus on the consumer psyche and understand the importance of the constantly evolving trends in consumers' lifestyles (Góbe, 2001). Emotional branding as a concept will be introduced next, as it is an important concept regarding the topic of this graduate thesis.

Emotional Branding

When it comes to branding and purchase decisions, emotions play a huge role in today's consumers' lives. As we live in a world full of choices and options, and brands do not often want to simply compete in price, they have realized the importance of building emotions around their brands and products and connecting them with certain associations. According to Góbe (2001), a brand's most important investment is building the right emotion with the promise the brand makes to its consumers by giving permission for the consumers to enjoy the specific world of that particular brand. Emotional branding, thus, connects products and consumers in an emotionally profound way, which creates personal dialogue between the brand and its consumers (Góbe, 2001). Emotional branding can also be a critical factor in determining brand loyalty, since consumers do not easily forget how a brand makes them feel, even though they would not remember the brand's technicalities, such as product attributes, features, and facts (Kim & Sullivan, 2019). Garg et al. (2018) emphasize that emotional branding has, in fact, become a necessity for most brands today, and the most important factor producing brand loyalty.

Emotional branding is a way to promote customers' long-lasting psychological attachment to a brand (Garg et al., 2018). Kim & Sullivan (2019, 2) define emotional branding as "a brand's strategy that stimulates consumers' affective state, appealing to their feelings with the aim of increasing consumer loyalty toward the brand." Góbe (2001) stresses that today's customers expect their favorite brands to know them, both intimately and individually, with a solid understanding of their needs and cultural orientation. Brands should identify in advance the emotion that they feel would best build a connection between the brand and the consumers in order to be able to communicate with the consumers in a more rational and humanitarian manner and affect deeply their feelings and senses (Garg et al., 2018). Kim & Sullivan (2019) list four different strategies that are sensory branding, storytelling, cause branding, and empowerment that can be used as ways of implementing emotional branding. Góbe (2001) grounds emotional branding on

relationship, sensorial experiences, imagination, and vision. This thesis will concentrate on the storytelling aspect that leans on the use of imagination and vision, while affecting people's feelings and senses.

2.2 Storytelling and Brand Stories

An ancient form of communication, a story, is impressive because it makes the audience identify with it, has the power to persuade and change attitudes, furthers one's memory, facilitates understanding, softens the message, and is capable of telling more than a few sentences of pure facts (Rauhala & Vikström, 2014). As stated at the beginning of this thesis, stories are present everywhere, and people get exposed to them anywhere in the world despite their age, social status, cultural background, etc. Stories can be seen as a common cultural element in people's lives that enables people to understand the world better, and helps individuals to interpret their personal feelings, life experiences, and surrounding things (Huang 2010). Lots of learning, e.g. about history, culture, and personal growth, also occurs via storytelling (Huang 2010). Story listeners get inside the idea, and in a way they might even feel and experience the story, as they would have lived it themselves (Brown et al., 2005). Stories and narratives are often used as synonyms, but van Laer et al. (2014) argue that they are, in fact, two distinct elements between the production and consumption of stories. According to van Laer et al. (2014), a story is the storyteller's production told from the point of view of the person telling the story, including the basic elements of a story: the plot, the characters, the climax, and the outcome; while a narrative, on the other hand, equals the story-receiver's consumption of the story, meaning how the consumer interprets the story and makes sense of it converting it into a narrative.

A brand story is a way to stand out from the competitors and stay in the consumers' minds (Rauhala & Vikström, 2014). Storytelling needs to be goal-oriented to really make sense

and be useful for the company (Rauhala & Vikström, 2014). Within digitalization, the use of stories has become more universal and ubiquitous than ever before, and storytelling as a part of customer engagement strategy has intensified and is extensively used in different domains and industries (van Laer et al., 2019). The process of digital storytelling includes three decisions that are deciding how the story will be made and delivered, who will deliver it, and which audiences it will be oriented to (van Laer et al., 2019). Constantly advancing technological developments offer storytellers new kinds of opportunities and ways to tell even more engrossing stories, which will most likely further enhance the power of storytelling (van Laer et al., 2019). Constantly growing online platforms offer endless canvases for companies to paint their stories on.

Narrative Transportation

An important concept to consider in relation to stories and brand stories is the narrative transportation, which equals the mental process in which the story receiver gets mentally “transported” elsewhere or inside the narrative through an engaging story. According to van Laer et al. (2014, 798), narrative transportation happens when a consumer “experiences a feeling of entering a world evoked by the narrative because of empathy for the story characters and imagination of the story plot.” Narrative transportation, or mental simulation, as Escalas (2004) refers to it, typically involves the self, making the individual the main character of the story. In order for the narrative transportation to take place, van Laer et al. (2014) list three critical storyteller antecedents that include identifiable characters, imaginable plot, and verisimilitude. Thus, a great and credible story must have characters that the audience can relate to, the plot must seem realistic and possible, and it must be likely that the events of the story could actually happen. Similarly, crucial story receiver antecedents can be identified as familiarity, attention, transportability, and demographic antecedents (age, education, sex) (van Laer et al., 2014).

Van Laer et al. (2014), point out that as the narrative transportation is more unintentionally affective than intentionally cognitive in its nature, the consumers are, thus, so engrossed with the story that they might not be able to evaluate arguments critically. Escalas (2004) validates that mental simulation leads to improved ad attitudes and brand evaluations, as consumers become lost or absorbed by their thoughts and they are distracted from critical thinking and evaluation of the ad's arguments. Dahlén et al. (2010, 13) highlight that "the more an advertisement encourages narrative processing and therefore becomes linked to the consumer's self-concept, the more meaningful the brand becomes." As consumers are so used to receiving push advertising in the form of rational arguments and analytical persuasion, they might not realize and expect commercial content in the form of a story (van Laer et al., 2019). Although, if consumers cannot simulate and imagine themselves in the advertisement or using the product, they tend to engage in analytical thought process resulting in more critical thinking and less positive thoughts, which results in less favorable brand perception (Escalas, 2004). Van Laer et al. (2019) bring up an interesting fact that story-receivers are usually most persuaded and emotionally touched by the stories, when they receive them alone. They continue that the presence of others may hinder the narrative transportation effect, because people often try to hide their feelings in the presence of others, as they are afraid that other people might judge them as being too emotional.

Because of the narrative transportation, brand stories are an excellent way for companies to differentiate their products from those of their competitors (Lin & Chen, 2015). Commercial stories aim to persuade customers and fulfill marketing objectives by leading the consumer into the "brand's world" through a story (van Laer et al., 2019). Consumers use their imagination and adapt the brand story to their own specific needs. Consumers look for both experiences that can fulfill their emotions and dreams, as well as positive feelings that brands can generate through storytelling (Lundqvist et al., 2012). Stories are often used as a means to convey and communicate brand values that consumers can relate themselves to (Lundqvist et al., 2012). A common and engaging advertising tactic used by marketers is to invite the consumers to imagine positive scenarios, in which they use the

products advertised (Escalas, 2004). According to Dahlén et al. (2010), narrative-driven marketing communication triggers memory by personalizing company products, which makes consumers feel as these products would be pertinent to how they express their individuality, lifestyle, and notion of self.

2.3 Elements of a Successful Brand Story

What then constructs a successful and powerful brand story, the kind that appeals to consumers and makes them buy the branded products, preferably over and over again? As I stated earlier, a brand's most important investment is building the right emotion with the promise that is made to consumers by giving a permission for the consumers to enjoy the specific world of that particular brand (Góbe, 2001), preferably through an engrossing brand story and narrative transportation resulting from it. The ways to produce that engrossing brand story require skills and imagination from the company, as well as some technicalities for creating a logical and intelligible structure. According to Escalas (2004), the narrative structure of a story consists of two crucial elements: chronology and causality, and the story can be divided into three different sections: beginning, middle, and end. Huang (2010) lists three essential things to keep in mind when aiming for a successful brand story: authenticity, narrator, and plot. Additionally, along with a clear plot, stories need to have identifiable characters, action that takes place, an engrossing or interesting setting, climax of some sort, denouement or solution, and something has to change as an end result (Kent, 2015). I will introduce the concepts of Authenticity, Narrator, and Plot next, because I find them essential for crafting an engrossing brand story that will capture the audience's attention and help them identify with it.

2.3.1 Authenticity

Huang (2010) claims that it is up to the audience to decide whether the story is perceived authentic despite of the actual truthfulness of the story, because if the story fits into the audience's reality, it can easily be seen as authentic. An authentic story is important for the brand's success, as it can increase consumers' trust and commitment towards the brand (Huang, 2010). Beverland (2005) states that in order to seem authentic, the development of a sincere brand story is vital, although yet again, it does not need to be true word by word, as long as it seems believable and authentic enough. Also Lundqvist et al. (2012) highlight that the brand story needs to at least seem authentic, and Kalliomäki (2014) emphasizes the perceived authenticity. Perceived authenticity can be achieved through references to historical events that really did take place, even though the brand story would otherwise be fictitious (Ruy et al., 2019). It can be argued then that a great brand story does not, in fact, need to be completely true, as long as it seems authentic enough. On the other hand, consumers might get disappointed if they believe a brand story to be true, and later find it to be made up. Thus, there seems to be a thin line with the actual truth and small white lies. Rauhala & Vikström (2014), furthermore, bring up the ethicality of stories, as they can easily be used ethically wrong, as it is easy to simplify the truth and distort things to sound plausible, and thus manipulate and mislead. Authenticity is further elaborated in the next section, as I have chosen it to be one of the main concepts of interest for this thesis.

2.3.2 Narrator

Another important factor considering a successful brand story is the narrator(s), who guides and persuades the audience. When the story is told from the narrator's perspective, the audience is more likely to believe it than coming from a third party. Positive brand associations can be created, when the consumer believes and trusts what the narrator presents in the story. When the narrator shares his own experiences that seem trustworthy,

the audience is much more likely to construct a positive brand image. (Huang, 2010) The primary narrator of the story holds a position of power, and controls the way the story is being told (Boje, 2001). The story should be performed with a feeling and passion, and the storyteller must tell the story as if he had lived the experience himself even if he in reality would not have (Brown et al., 2005). As Kent (2015, 484) puts it, “a good story resonates with the audience’s lived experience, and tells the story that an organization or individual wants told.” In other words, the storyteller should adapt the storyline for that specific audience in question.

Rauhala & Vikström (2014), indeed, stress that the storyteller needs to know his target audience in terms of understanding what persuades and works for them, and what the audience will be able to identify with. Additionally, the storyteller needs to be someone who the audience can easily relate to, or the characters of the story must be easily relatable (van Laer et al., 2014). Yet, it is not defined, whether the storyteller must be one of the company’s employees or one of its customers. In fact, Harmeling et al. (2017, 331) state that “the lines between employees and customers have blurred, creating a need for new theories that can explain evolving roles, relationships, and outcomes.” When the storytellers are the actual users of the brand instead of the company’s employees and brand owners, consumers and story receivers might be more likely to react in a positive way, as they experience that it is easier to trust the narrators (van Laer et al., 2019). Online consumers come up with their own stories and personal tales that build on the existing brands, emphasize their uniqueness, and demonstrate to others how they can individualize brands as well by personalizing them (Brown et al., 2003). Storytelling is, thus, also a great way to get the customers to become brand ambassadors, as people love to tell further a good story and recommend the brand to others through it (Lundqvist et al., 2012). In social media, the roles of a storyteller and a story-receiver are often unclear and changing, as both the brand owner and the consumers can take either the role of the storyteller or the role of the story receiver (van Laer et al., 2019).

2.3.3 Plot

Finally, when crafting a brand story, the plot serves the important role that organizes experiences in a meaningful and logical sequence (Huang, 2010). A rational and clear storyline may communicate the company values and desired messages, and thus construct a positive brand image and commitment to the brand, whereas an unclear plot might do the opposite (Huang, 2010). A story is a practical way to create a strong bond between the brand and the consumer, and make more abstract and difficult matters more concrete and manageable (Rauhala & Vikström, 2014). As Ruy et al. (2019, 349) put it, “brand messages, appropriately narrated, help people make sense of and retain the information the brand presents them.” A more typical brand story most of the time reveals the business owners’ dream and vision, and somehow illustrates how the entrepreneurs have established a business through their own interest, passion, and vision, while an atypical brand story might often be more special and a novelty for consumers offering them something unexpected (Lin & Chen, 2015).

An engrossing story contains several parts that can be expected, as all stories should have a recognizable structure including a beginning, middle, and an end (Kent, 2015). A plot does not equal one single event or a scene, but rather a series of coherent events that are arranged in a particular way by the storyteller (Kent, 2015). Tobias (1993) introduces 20 different “master plots” that, according to Kent (2015, 484) “serve as a means for organizations to tell their own story, build identification, and connect with others.” These master plots include, for instance, quest, adventure, rivalry, underdog, and wretched excesses, and it should be carefully planned, which one to use and underline for which occasion and story.

2.4 Brand Authenticity

In order to discuss the concept of brand authenticity, it might be substantive to first define the meaning and background of “authenticity,” as well as its relevance to branding. Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines “authenticity” as “the quality of being real or true.” Peterson (2005), however, claims that authenticity might instead be constructed and subject to continual change, and that it takes an effort to seem authentic. He continues that the constructed authenticity can take different forms that include, for instance, authenticity through ethnic/cultural identity, authenticity through status identity, and technologically mediated authenticity (Peterson, 2005). According to Graves-Brown et al. (2013), authenticity as a concept has changed substantially through time: when the medieval authenticity was dependent of faith and religion, authenticity in the modern era is seen as an experiential function concerned with the pragmatic quality of things. Peterson (2005) makes a valid point that authenticity is, in fact, often judged by the end users or end consumers who have the authority to decide what is perceived as authentic and what is not. Grayson & Martinec (2004) stress that the word “authentic” has two distinct meanings, indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity, that are still both associated with genuineness and truth, but in different ways. Indexical authenticity denotes that the object (or person) actually has the factual and spatio-temporal link that is claimed, while iconic authenticity only refers to something that is an authentic recreation of the original object (or person). Grayson & Martinec (2004) argue that something that is indexically authentic might be perceived more authentic than something that is iconically authentic, as authenticity is mainly associated with truthfulness and facts. Still, they emphasize the use of imagination being the influence of perceiving authenticity.

As stated in the previous section 2.3, authenticity is one of the main aspects of a brand story. However, according to various authors (Huang, 2010; Beverland, 2005; Lundqvist et al., 2012; Ruy et al., 2019), a brand story does not need to be truly authentic, as long as it seems as it could be true and fits to the consumer’s mindset and set of values. As Peterson

(2005, 1083) states, “issues of authenticity most often come into play when authenticity has been put in doubt.” In other words, as long as the truthfulness of the story is not questioned for one reason or another, consumers happily believe it. Fritz et al. (2017, 325) state that “authenticity serves as evidence of quality and differentiation for consumers,” and that is something that has existed for hundreds of years (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). A brand’s behavior reflects its core values and norms according to which it is perceived as being true to itself, in other words authentic (Fritz et al., 2017). Fritz et al. (2017) list different variables that can closely influence brand authenticity, and which could be incorporated in the brand story as well. These variables include connections to the brand’s past, its virtuousness, the employees that represent the brand, and consumers’ self-identification with the brand. Perceived brand authenticity can generate strong emotional bonds between the consumer and the brand that will both result in enhanced consumer loyalty, as well as consumer tolerance in case of a bad brand experience (i.e. the willingness to forgive possible mistakes) (Fritz et al., 2017).

Finnishness

As stated above in the previous part, the brand’s past and the consumers’ self-identification are some of the important factors that influence brand authenticity. When the scope of this study is in Finland, “Finnishness” might be a very notable factor to consider related to both of those sources of influence. Many Finnish brands are, indeed, proud to be Finnish, and wish to highlight their Finnish roots and backgrounds in their brand stories. This makes sense, as consumers’ feelings linked to consumers’ national identity are an important component that influences consumer behavior (Carvalho et al., 2019). Carvalho et al. (2019) claim that there are three different conceptual roots of national identity that affect purchase behavior: self-concept, social identity, and intergroup relations. Self-concept equals an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of his self; social identity is understood as a membership of a social group(s); and intergroup relations has to do with

the relationships that exist between in-groups and out-groups, in other words those groups that the individual belongs to and does not belong to. According to Carvalho et al. (2019, 312), “a sense of national identity provides a powerful means of defining and locating individual selves in the world, allowing a person to gain an idea of who they are in this globalized and complex world,” which is also closely linked to his consumer behavior. Therefore it can be argued that consumers’ self-identification with its national identity, in this case Finnishness for the Finnish consumers, is an argument worth observing, when taking a closer look at Finnish companies and their storytelling.

However, Finnish companies do not target their brands and products solely to Finnish consumers; some brands are rather targeted to consumers from other countries that might find Finland exotic and absorbing. Finland has been traditionally seen as a country of nature – forests and lakes, simplicity and Nordic design, peace and quietness, honesty, and somewhat weird habits. Perhaps members of other societies and cultures can find some Finnish values and idiosyncrasies relatable and admirable, even though their consumer behavior cannot be explained by their national identity necessarily. However, if consumers from other countries are not aware of Finland and Finnish characteristics and habits, being a Finnish brand will do little for the company. Hakala et al. (2013) stress that country images are important extrinsic cues when consumers evaluate products, and a positive country image can boost a positive reputation even for a whole product category. According to Bartosik-Purgat (2018), the main factors that influence consumers’ buying decisions include the country-of-origin along with brand image. Country-of-origin-effect refers to how consumers’ product evaluations are influenced by a country’s image, and how brands originating from specific countries are perceived (Bartosik-Purgat, 2018). These assumptions are based on stereotypes and include the countries’ traditions and specialization in manufacturing particular products, although they do not always represent the truth, yet they might perceive a powerful effect on purchase decisions (Bartosik-Purgat, 2018).

Magnusson et al. (2011) make an interesting point and argue that what, in fact, affects and influences consumers' brand attitude is the perceived brand origin regardless of the degree of accuracy of the perception. They introduce a concept called "product country image," which can differ from the actual country of origin, and make a product seem more attractive, since some countries can sometimes be seen more attractive or as sources for better quality than others. However, I would argue that Finnish companies mostly wish to highlight their Finnishness rather than try to hide it, and for many people from outside of Finland, Finnishness would be seen as a positive or at least as a neutral aspect, depending on the degree of familiarity to Finland. Thus, brand authenticity can closely be linked to the company's background and roots, often reflecting their national identity, one way or another.

2.5 Brand Stories and Social Media

An essential part of today's companies' branding and brand strategy is without a doubt social media. Thus, I would leave an essential part ignored if I did not also concentrate on social media in this graduate thesis when talking about storytelling and brand stories. As Zulkifli Abd & Nur Ayuni (2015) put it, in today's consumer's world, the usage of smartphones has evolved to a level in which a smartphone can be said to bring a new kind of meaning to human's life while truly becoming a "man's new best friend." Part of billions of individuals' everyday lives include utilizing the Internet, doing online networking, using portable applications, and taking advantage of other advanced correspondence innovations (Fahmi Al-Zyoud, 2018).

Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines social media as follows: "forms of media that allow people to communicate and share information using the Internet or mobile phones." Fahmi Al-Zyoud (2018), in turn, characterizes social media from the business perspective by two

factors: customer interaction and engagement, and user-generated content. At first, only individuals used social media, but after businesses realized the opportunities provided by it, it has been an unwritten rule for brands to exist on social media to exist as a business and a brand at all. Helal et al. (2018), emphasize that without social media, today's brand will not exist, as social media tends to be linked to everything. Kohli et al. (2015) claim that social media can either kill or strengthen a brand; depending on how quickly companies will be able to adopt new strategies in response to changing consumer preferences and demands. It is also evident that it is really effortless for today's consumers to let others know if they are unsatisfied with a company, and then it is crucial for the company to show the repentance immediately and apologize the customer if needed. However, this goes also the other way around, and lots of positive feedback can be easily shared on social media platforms and online.

When it comes to branding and a how branding strategy has traditionally been crafted, social media seems to have changed its rules radically. Traditionally, branding equaled prominent financial investment in advertising and promotion budgets in order for a company to get noticed in the marketplace, meaning that there was a so called high barrier for new companies to be established, as significant financial backing was especially crucial in the early stages of a new brand (Kohli et al., 2015). After businesses started using social media as a part of their branding strategy, however, it became easier for new businesses to get a word out about their brand and products. Niche brands targeted to smaller segments are now more likely to be introduced and get their voices heard, as branding no more requires large funds. This, in turn has increased the competition and made it tougher for brands to stay on the top. Kohli et al. (2015, 36) even state that there are understandable concerns on how social media might threaten the very essence of branding it being a "rapidly evolving space with no definitive sense of what direction it may take." This has certainly increased pressure on brands to be present in different social medias in order to stay in consumers' minds, and being able to communicate with consumers.

Kohli et al. (2015) also claim that social media has switched and transformed the traditional marketing communication model, in which the marketers only communicated to their consumers, to be a new kind of model, in which the communication truly flows both ways between the marketer and the consumer. Power has shifted into consumers' favor, and buyers have become more demanding and discriminating creating more pressure on companies to deliver consumers exactly what they want and need (Kohli et al., 2015). As I stated earlier in this graduate thesis, today's consumers expect brands to know them rather personally and create content specifically for them, something that they are interested in. Moreover, Kohli et al. (2015) predict that it will continue to be important to deliver content that builds an emotional connection and/or can be seen as an expression of the consumer's identity, as physical attributes are much easier to copy, and consumers are more likely to stick to brands that awake emotions in them. According to Helal et al. (2018), the ability of consumers to follow brands very closely has reinforced the sense of a community, meaning that the consumer and the brand are part of a specific and sometimes even exclusive group. Lately, consumers have also been seen as important content creators for brands, either being paid to do so, or simply doing so for the sake of devotion for a certain brand.

Accordingly, word-of-mouth marketing generated by consumers is more important than ever before, because, according to Kohli et al. (2015, 41), "today's stamp of quality assurance is word-of-mouth of social media participants." Also Chen et al. (2017) emphasize the significance of electronic word-of-mouth, as online reviews offer important information about the product, service, brand, or company. Baker et al. (2016), however, agree on the significance of word-of-mouth, but claim that even stronger effects occur within offline word-of-mouth, which contradicts the traditional way of viewing the online word-of-mouth. Still, word-of-mouth in general, either online or offline, is an important factor affecting today's brands and people's evaluation of them. The online reviews and the use of social media have also made today's brands more transparent, meaning that they are truly required to be good and deliver quality products or services in order to become and stay successful (Kohli et al., 2015). Once again, the emotional bond between the brand

and the consumer becomes essential, as product attributes and prices are easily compared and copied online, which make the competition for brands harder and harder.

Instagram

Among the popular social media sites in 2019 I have chosen Instagram to be in the focus of this graduate thesis. Instagram is a social media site that functions around images that users share. Users are able to follow others and be followed, comment and like other users' photos, and share content through direct messages or by putting it on their personal "Instagram Stories." Instagram was official launched in the AppStore in October 2010, and it quickly reached one million users within two months (Martinus & Chaniago, 2017; Zulkifli Abd & Nur Ayuni, 2015). Eight years later, in June 2018, the site reached one billion monthly active users (Clement, 2019), and it is without a doubt one of the most popular social medias currently, gaining popularity globally among ordinary people, companies, bloggers, photographers, and other content creators. According to Mariane (2018), Instagram is in constant expansion mainly because it privileges the image and video representations especially through mobile devices. Photos can be seen as "proofs of moments," the sort of "crystallization of a time interval" (Mariane, 2018, 333).

For companies, Instagram allows new types of opportunities to get closer to consumers while at the same time letting consumers get closer to them. Thinking outside the box and offering consumers and followers innovative content is key to success, according to Helal et al. (2018). Through the use of Instagram, brands can highlight their brand story, and strengthen their relationships with current and prospective customers (Martinus & Chaniago, 2017). It provides a space that is perfect for visual storytelling, where either one image or sequence of images, is able to tell a singular and significant story (Mariane, 2018). Mariane (2018, 350), highlights that "within this new, flexible, and elastic Instagram paradigm, brands need not restrain themselves in terms of uniformity,

consistency of colors, filters or other standardizations.” Thus, Instagram offers them a place where to get creative and not necessarily stick to the stiff brand image so much, but rather become humane and easily approachable. Brands have an opportunity to create themselves a strong brand identity (Helal et al., 2018). Moreover, the newest feature of Instagram, the “Instagram Stories” that allows users to share non-concrete content only for 24 hours, offers brands a brilliant way to keep a closer, and quite possibly more authentic, relationship with their audience, as everyday events can be easily shared and showed as a priority on top of the application site (Mariane, 2018). Helal et al. (2018) stress that the viewer and audience is now truly part of the brand’s journey, meaning that a brand has potential to reach a massive and global audience in real time, each step of the way.

For consumers, Instagram offers different ways of following and consuming brands. Dimitriu & Guesalaga (2017) identify four underlying motivators for consumers’ social media behavior, which include brand tacit engagement, brand exhibiting, brand patronizing, and brand deal seeking that can further be derived to different customer segments, such as content seekers, observers, deal hunters, hardcore fans, posers, and respectively, patronizers. It would be useful for companies to recognize the different motivators for consumers’ social media behavior in order to be able to respond to their needs accordingly. Along with sharing their personal experiences, consumers also share their lifestyle and consumption choices on Instagram, expressing their preferences and communicating their brand affiliation while also staying in touch with commercial organizations (Dimitriu & Guesalaga, 2017).

According to Dimitriu & Guesalaga (2017, 580), “social media has redefined how consumers relate to and behave toward brands,” meaning that brand endorsement can be shown easily and more publicly, and actual relationships with the brands can be formed. Helal et al. (2018), in turn, identify four major themes; relevant, exposure, content, and brand ambassadors, that drive the brand consumption on social media. A brand’s Instagram profile offers relevant information for a consumer, and helps him stay up to date with the

latest trends. Instagram itself enables consumers to get exposed to new brands around the world, and consumers are discovering brands from the opposite sides of the world, which used to be possible only with massive advertisement budgets and enormous advertising campaigns. Content is the most important factor for attracting social media users. Lastly, collaborations with bloggers and other famous people might be a remarkable factor for a consumption choice, as ordinary consumers might relate to the bloggers they follow so much that they rely on their opinions as much as they would on their friend's opinion. Thus, social media certainly offers brands many opportunities to reach out to customers, even if the competition among the brands has tightened and the traditional branding changed from its original form.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of my thesis will constitute of the concepts introduced in the previous parts, and this is illustrated in the diagram below (see Diagram 1). The main theoretical concepts and themes of this thesis are Brand Story, Authenticity, and Emotional Branding, which are all connected to each other, and linked to the theoretical concept of Branding via Storytelling. The concepts of Authenticity and Emotional Branding support each other, especially Authenticity affecting Emotional Branding. Both of these are promoted in and through the Brand Story. These concepts all come into existence in the brand's being and doing, and one of the main channels for them to thrive is on Social Media, and in the case of this study, on Instagram. The theoretical framework guides my research process so that the research questions introduced in Section 1.2 were crafted according to this framework, and the findings in Chapter 4 are also in accordance with this framework.



Diagram 1: Theoretical Framework

3 DATA AND METHODS

This study was carried out as a multiple case study, meaning that several cases and sourced of data relevant for the topic were looked into and compared to each other in order to be able to make sense of the phenomenon in question and get a more comprehensive understanding of it. In this chapter, I will outline the data that is analyzed in this study, illustrate and justify the research methods that I have chosen for the data collection, rationalize the sample that I have chosen for the focus, and present the analysis method. In this chapter I will also briefly introduce the companies that constitute the sample. Lastly, I will discuss the trustworthiness of this study.

3.1 Data

The data analyzed in this thesis consists of four semi-structured reflective interviews conducted and transcribed into a written form, as well as the websites and Instagram accounts of the sample companies. I will first introduce the sample and my reasoning for selecting the specific sample in question. Afterwards, I will illustrate the data that I used for this thesis in more detail providing also two tables that illustrate the collected data.

3.1.1 Sample

The core sample of this study constitutes of four companies. As qualitative inquiries usually, this study also focuses on a relatively small sample that is purposefully selected (Patton, 1990) and strategically controlled in order to obtain a valid answer to the aforementioned research questions (Davies, 2007). The sampling strategy through which the sample has been selected is intensity sampling that consists of information-rich cases, which convey the phenomenon of interest intensely (but not extremely) (Patton, 1990). As Patton (1990, 169) states, “the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases, whose study will illuminate the questions under study,” therefore, the companies selected for the interview and the focus of this study are small or relatively small Finnish firms that seem to use storytelling in different and clever ways in their communication and branding, in other words, companies that have a lot to offer for examining the topic. The sample units, in this case the four companies, have been specifically chosen, because they have a direct reference to the research questions (Bell et al., 2019).

According to Ghauri & Grønhaug (2010), several dimensions are important to consider when defining the sample and the extent of the study. The scope of this thesis is Finland, and the characteristics that define and link the sample companies are that the companies are small or relatively small employing 4-29 people (as of November 2019), they have been established in 2010s being relatively young companies, they employ storytelling more or less purposefully and actively in their communication, and they seem to have an authentic brand story that highlights the founders. My reasoning for interviewing and investigating small and young companies is based on the assumption that they have created their brand not too long ago, in the age of social media branding and storytelling, and since they are relatively young companies, they have most likely not re-branded themselves storytelling being an important aspect for them from the beginning. As not being huge companies, I also found them more approachable and manageable. Even though the companies are different compared to each other, they still accompany similar aspects and

characteristics, which makes them comparable. Thus, it can be reasoned that the chosen companies can be researched and compared with each other, and that the results can be justified. The sample includes (4) Finnish companies that I will describe below briefly:

(1) Aarni

Aarni is a Finnish company founded by three young men from Klaukkala. The company was established in 2015, and it currently (November 2019) employs five people. The main products of Aarni include watches made of Finnish wood (along with wood from other countries), and the company also produces wooden sunglasses, and wallets made of ecological nature's materials, such as cork and elk leather. Today, Aarni's story embraces the background the founders share, along with the Finnish nature, and the ecological materials used for the products. Aarni's products are sold in their online store as well as through various jewelry retailers in Finland.

(2) Kyrö

Kyrö is a company founded by five Finnish men that decided in 2012 to start producing Finnish rye whisky. The company was established later in 2014, and it currently (November 2019) employs 29 people. Kyrö's main focus is to produce alcoholic drinks including gin, whisky, dairy cream liqueur, long drinks, and experimental rye distillates. Additionally, the company sells different Kyrö merchandise including clothing, gift cards, glasses and such. Kyrö's home is in Isokyrö, where it distills its alcoholic products and offers visitors a chance to participate in a distillery tour or events held occasionally. Among many other things, Kyrö is known for being awarded as the World's Best Gin for Gin&Tonic by IWSC (International Wine & Spirit Competition), as well as its personal brand picture in which the founders run naked in a rye field. Currently, Kyrö exports its products to 30 different countries.

(3) The other danish guy

The other danish guy is a Finnish company established in 2015. The name for the company originates from a misunderstanding during a trip to New York City, where one of the founders through an incident got called “the other Danish guy.” The company sells men’s underwear online with a promise of ultimate comfort allowing the user to wear the trunks with and for just about anything. The company slogan is “Only Three Balls Matter”, which refers to the comfort of the product as well as it being made from the regenerated ocean plastics. The brand is also known for its honest stories and videos of ordinary men. The other danish guy currently employs fewer than five people.

(4) 3 kaveria

3 kaveria is an ice cream company that was established in 2012 in Helsinki, selling its first ice creams to grocery stores in the following year. 3 kaveria, according to its name, is a company by three friends, Jukka, Ilkka, and Sauli, which employs about 15 people (November 2019), varying on the summer and winter seasons. 3 kaveria is known for producing ice cream with real flavors and real ingredients testing and perfecting the flavors by hand. The company website introduces 14 different flavors including lactose free, low-lactose, less sugar, and vegan options. The ice creams are sold throughout Finland, the main focus being in the Helsinki metropolitan area. The company also exports its ice cream to Sweden.

3.1.1 The Interviews

As mentioned above, the data includes four interview transcripts. Hence, the main data collection method that was executed for this thesis is a semi-structured reflective interview, meaning that the topics, sample size, interviewees, and interview questions were carefully

determined beforehand (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010), although the questions may have not needed to follow exactly and strictly the outlined plan, as the interviewees might have revealed something worth concentrating on more (Bell et al., 2019). As the focus of the study is on the company perspective on storytelling, interviewing the people behind the brand stories was logical for finding out their mindsets. Interview was, thus, chosen for the main data collection method because its aim is to stimulate reflection and exploration (Davies, 2007), which abled me to obtain a broader insight of the topic than, for instance, a closed-questioned survey would have. The interview questions were crafted to be in line with the research questions, and the base for them was the same for all of the companies that I interviewed. However, some additional questions were indicated when the company in question had an area of specialty or obtained something that the others did not. There was also space to wander on specific topics or themes when they turned out to be more important or substantive during the interviews than what I had predicted. After the interviews were conducted and audio-recorded, I transcribed them into interview transcripts in order to proceed to analyze them thematically. Transcripts do not only reveal the words the interviewees say, but also the ways they say them (Bell et al., 2019).

Semi-structured interview as a data collection method pursued to find answers for my three research questions. The interviews that I conducted are outlined in the table below (see Table 1). There are total of four interviews that lasted between 16 and 47 minutes, depending on how much the interviewees had to say about the topic. The big difference of the duration can be explained by that, but also by my lack of experience as an interviewer. I think that I learned to become a better interviewer during the interview process, and I was able to ask more specifying questions later in the process when I knew better of what would be a useful piece of information for the sake of my research. Most of the interviews were conducted in late fall between October 31 and November 26, 2019 but last one of them on January 10, 2020 due to the busy schedule of the interviewee. The transcripts vary between 5-11 pages.

Name and title of the interviewee	Date of the interview	Duration of the interview	Number of the pages in a transcript
Anna Wikholm, In charge of marketing at 3 kaveria (1*)	21.11.2019	24 min.	10
Mikko Koskinen, Founder and in charge of branding at Kyrö (2*)	26.11.2019	38 min.	10
Pyyry Alamettälä, Founder of Aarni (3*)	31.10.2019	16 min.	5
Tommi Lähde, Founder of The other danish guy (4*)	10.1.2020	47 min.	11

Table 1: The interviews

* The quotations in Chapter 4 are numbered and the numbers (1-4) refer to the numbers of the interviewees in Table 1. For the sake of some anonymity, the quotations do not include the names of the interviewees directly.

3.1.2 Company Websites and Instagram

Another data source for this graduate thesis is the sample companies' websites as well as their Instagram accounts. Thus, another data collection method that I used in this thesis was looking carefully into the sample companies' websites and social media, specifically their Instagram accounts, in order to examine the ways of storytelling used in those. This data collection method aimed to offer validation for the interviews, as well as give me more information for the research questions, especially concerning the first two about authenticity and emotional branding. I collected and analyzed 100 most recent Instagram posts from the companies by November 30, 2019, 25 posts from each, as well as followed the companies' overall use of Instagram, and the "Instagram Stories" for two weeks between December 9 and December 22. In addition to this, I studied the brand stories from the companies' websites, as well as their overall language and style they use on their

websites, making seven pages of notes of them. The purpose here was to concretize and locate the brand stories and analyze them further, along with finding connections to the interviews. On Instagram, the focus was on how the brand story gets told on a daily basis through pictures, texts, and videos, on a level that might seem more personal for the followers of the brand, while on the companies' websites the target is analyzing the brand story as something more stable and possibly more serious. The elements of authenticity and emotional aspects were also examined carefully. This collected data of the websites and Instagram is illustrated in the table below (see Table 2).

	Websites	Instagram posts	Instagram Stories
Aarni	https://aarniwood.com (both the Finnish and the English sites) focus mostly on the front page, "Our Story" and "The True Story of Aarni" video, and "Materials"	25 posts most recent posts by Nov 30, 2019, in the case of this company: 27 Oct – 27 Nov	Instagram Stories of the company: Dec 9 – Dec 27 during which this company posted on its Instagram stories everyday
Kyrö	https://kyrodistillery.com (both the Finnish and the English sites) focus mostly on the front page, "Story", "People", and "Visitor Center", although paying attention to all the small details over the website.	25 posts most recent posts by Nov 30, 2019, in the case of this company: Oct 12 – Nov 29	Instagram Stories of the company: Dec 9 – Dec 27 during which this company posted on its Instagram stories on 8 days
The other danish guy	https://theotherdanishguy.com (both the Finnish and the English sites) focus mostly on the front page, "Stories", and "Brand", along with the overall appearance and details of the sites.	25 posts most recent posts by Nov 30, 2019, in the case of this company: Jul 5 – Nov 11	Instagram Stories of the company: Dec 9 – Dec 27 during which this company posted on its Instagram stories on 6 days
3 kaveria	https://www.3friends.com (both the Finnish and the English sites) focus mostly on the front page, "Ice creams", and "3 friends"	25 posts most recent posts by Nov 30, 2019, in the case of this company: Aug 29 – Nov 26	Instagram Stories of the company: Dec 9 – Dec 27 during which this company posted on its Instagram stories on 5 days

Table 2: Websites and Instagram

3.2 Methods

This graduate thesis was implemented as a qualitative research, as my aim was to explore the arguments and benefits of storytelling in brand building from the company perspective, as well as explore the role of building authenticity and emotions through brand stories, rather than to find any concrete statistically representative quantitative findings (Davies, 2007). As qualitative research, the key purpose of this thesis is to understand and gain insight on the chosen topic (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2010).

The analysis method that I used for this thesis was thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, as well as of the sample companies' websites and Instagram accounts. Clarke & Braun (2017, 297) define thematic analysis as a “method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (‘themes’) within qualitative data.” Ryan & Bernard (2003, 87) describe themes to be “abstract constructs that link not only expressions found in texts but also expressions found in images, sounds, and objects.” Thematic analysis is a flexible way to analyze qualitative data by generating codes and themes that provide a framework for organizing and reporting analytic observations based on the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Part of this flexibility has to do with the freedom to determine themes in a number of ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006) specifically useful for the research in question.

Themes can form either from the data collected or the investigator's prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under examination (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). For this thesis, I chose the more theoretical approach of thematic analysis, which is more explicitly analyst-driven and inspired for the specific areas of interest that I had already before the data collection. According to Braun & Clarke (2006, 84), this form of thematic analysis “tends to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data.” As I had crafted my research questions before choosing the

analysis method, I looked for patterns that would constitute the themes and form subthemes, by searching for repetition, similarities and differences, and possible naturally occurring transitions that are all techniques for constructing the themes and subthemes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). I used color-coding in analyzing the interview transcripts, in order to be able to track common (sub)themes in them more effectively (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Once I had color-coded the interview transcripts, I searched for more repeated patterns and common arguments to prove my points in the analysis of the websites and Instagram accounts.

3.4 Trustworthiness of the Study

The limitation of the study might be the biasness of the sample, as the chosen companies are firms that actively use storytelling in some form, and there are lots of firms out there that employ little or no storytelling in their communications and/or branding strategy. Thus, the results of the study only reveal some insights that consider companies already extensively using storytelling as a means of branding. The interviewed companies are all from Finland, and therefore the results cannot be broadened to consider other regions or countries, as their operations environment, as well as business cultures might be completely different. The perspective that I have chosen for this thesis is the subjective vision of the firms combined with my personal research and interpretations, and the study will not disclose how the consumers view these companies and their brand stories. Lastly, the interviews will reveal subjective opinions of the interviewees, and other people even within the same brands, could take a different stance on some of the subjects and answer the questions differently.

4 FINDINGS

In this chapter, I will present the findings that I have come up with according to the research questions. The interviews and analysis on Instagram accounts and websites are combined under the same findings, and I will illustrate them by providing examples in forms of quotations from the interviews, Instagram, or websites, as well as showing images or screenshots from the companies' websites or Instagram that prove my points. As the interviews were conducted in Finnish, all the quotations are my rough translations from Finnish to English, and thus they might not be equal in both language word by word, as sometimes it was necessary to modify the translation in order to make sense of it in English. The quotations are marked with a number of the interviewee according to Table 1 (see Table 1 on page 40). Even though the sample companies differ from each other in terms of their industries and target customers, they shared many values and ideas on storytelling and branding, which could be somewhat easily compared and combined for findings. As I had expected, social media and Instagram was seen as an important tool and platform for storytelling, although one of the brands did not use it as extensively as the others. I was able to find similarities between the brands, but naturally differences occurred as well, and brands differed from each other in terms of their brand personalities, their ways of communication, and their social media use, as previously mentioned.

4.1 The Significance of Authenticity

The first research question (“How do small Finnish companies brand and differentiate themselves by creating ‘authentic’ brand stories?”) investigates building authenticity through brand stories, which turned out to be the “cornerstone” for these companies’ branding. According to the sample companies, authenticity is viewed extremely important, and it could be said that it is the base for the whole company and its existence. Below is an example quote of one of the interviewees that illustrates their stance of being a company with an authentic brand story:

“It really does mean everything to us! At least I personally strongly feel that I don’t want to start making up any stories that wouldn’t be authentic, because everything needs to have some kind of base in the truth and be based on true events and things, therefore it is really important. In fact, I think a company loses something really important when it decides not to be authentic. --- In my opinion, it’s a pity to underestimate the consumers by thinking that they wouldn’t notice if a story weren’t authentic; to me it’s not impressive at all. People do definitely notice if you’re not authentic.” (1)

This interviewee views being authentic extremely important for their company, and makes it clear that they value being truthful and trustful. Also other interviewees agreed, one of them stressing: *“It is the truth what resonates with people. Made up stories are made up stories.”* (4) Being authentic was, in fact, strongly present throughout in the interviews, and it could be somehow noticed in everything the interviewees stated.

Hence, by analyzing the interviews and the sample companies’ Instagram accounts and websites, I could identify five different themes through which the companies build authenticity and deliver authentic brand stories to their customers. These themes include having real people represent the company; having an authentic and truthful brand story; promoting honesty and transparency, including sharing their companies’ day-to-day life;

using humor in the specific way or tone for their company; and in one way or another representing “Finnishness” or “Nordicness” (see Diagram 2). I will elaborate and give examples of these themes in the following part.

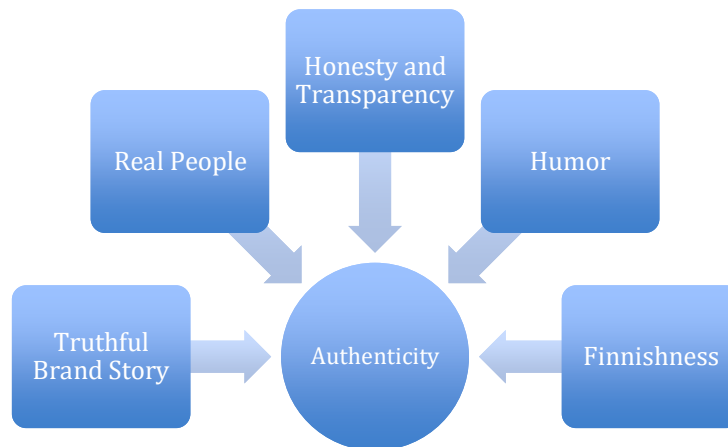


Diagram 2: The themes that constitute (Brand) Authenticity

4.1.1 Truthful Brand Story

On the basis of my analysis, I suggest that being an “authentic” company requires having an authentic brand story, in other words, telling a realistic narrative of how the company became into being. This is one of the most essential factors constituting in the brand authenticity. All of the sample companies told their brand stories to me enthusiastically in the interviews, and it was certain that they were proud of having had the courage to proceed to a dream that in the beginning might have seemed difficult or almost impossible, but then being able to succeed at it. The following excerpts are examples of how the companies viewed having an authentic brand story, and how they viewed their authentic brand stories beneficial:

“It is easy to see that the story has stuck in people’s minds. It sure is what makes us different from many other; it is our trump having a real, authentic story.” (1)

“In my opinion, it needs to be true. Well, there are also [made up] brand stories, through which some products or brands have gotten quite far. But I believe that for the employees and all the people creating the brand, it is much more motivating when it is real and they can stand behind their story. --- Honesty has a much bigger and much more enduring effect than building synthetic stories around the brand does.” (2)

“Surely we could have been able to get a more interesting, more sales-oriented story by taking it straight from fiction, but on the other hand, it is nice to be able to stand behind the story and tell people that it is really is sincere and truthful.” (3)

The previous quotations from the interviewees illustrate how the companies value their authentic brand stories, and are glad to be able to stand behind their truthful stories. As one of them states, it is motivating and easier for the company’s employees to work for a company, which story they can be promote as the truth and truly believe in. The companies also believe that having an authentic brand story is one of their ways to stand out from the competitors.

By taking a closer look and analyzing the companies’ websites, I learned that three of the four sample companies have produced brand videos for their consumers that tell their brand stories in their own personal way. The fourth company tells its brand story simply by words, which in a way possibly represents its personal way better than a fancy video might. The storylines of the brand stories organize the occurrences in a meaningful and logical sequence, and underline the company values highlighting the important factors special to them (Huang, 2010). As typical brand stories, these stories also reveal the business owners’ dreams and visions illustrating how the entrepreneurs have established a business through their own interest, passion, and vision (Lin & Chen, 2015), or a random occurrence that grew into a business idea. The brand stories of these sample companies

include adventure, challenge, accident, passion, curiosity, maturation, humor, being somewhat an underdog, and finally ending the stories in happy endings, in these cases establishing a company that is thriving. Tobias's (1993) classic master plots are, thus, represented, which, according to Kent (2015) serve ways of building identification for companies and making it easier for the customers to identify with the brands.

4.1.2 Real People

Having genuine, "real people" is, according to my analysis and research, another one of the most crucial things that constitute in an authentic brand, because it makes it easier for the consumers to trust the company and gives validation for the brand story being authentic and true. All of the sample companies' stories include ordinary, real people who shared a common idea or interest and decided to pursue that. Within these sample companies, friendship seems to play an important role, as all of the founders have started their company from friendship, one even naming itself as the "three friends". This, however, is just a coincidence, and I would not say that it is a requirement for a company to promote friendship in order to be authentic. As Huang (2010) and Kent (2015) emphasize, successful brand stories have persuasive narrators that tell the story from their own perspective and lived experiences making it easy for the consumers to identify with the narrators and the whole company, as they can easily relate to the personalities of the narrators or their lived experiences. The following quotes illustrate how it is not difficult for the consumers to identify with the sample companies' founders' experiences, as they could be examples of any ordinary person's life:

"Kalle's parents left for a holiday in the south, so we took over their garage for two weeks. There we distilled a so called 'distiller beer' that was transported to Beer Hunter's in Pori once ready and distilled further with the help of Miika Tuhkanen." (2)

“And then they started making experiences with a small machine. We had ordered online a small 300-euro ice cream machine, and with that at first we made different flavors at home, and all of us families got to taste them, and they were insanely delicious. Made just like anyone would make ice cream at home.” (1)

“He ended up lotioning his painful backside in the ladies’ toilet and caused bewilderment and chaos when the poor women saw him having his pants down and a Vaseline tube in his hand making the women ran out of there yelling ‘Call the cops, there’s someone in the ladies’ room’ ---” (4)

“--- At the beginning we would beat eggs and squeeze lemons by hand, and there was, let’s say, lots of room for improvement. ---” (1)

“And in the first year, we sold altogether 5000 bottles. In fact from the trunk of our CEO’s Skoda, --- But still legally and to a bar.” (2)

Moreover, the founders’ names and pictures come up multiple times in the interviews, on their websites, and on their Instagram accounts, which stands for the fact that they are real, authentic people, instead of made-up characters. Kyrö introduces all of its employees at its website with a black and white picture of the person and a little, personal text that somehow reveals something personal of that employee (see Image 1). This is one of their ways to bring the consumer closer to the company’s employees and their story. A screenshot of the website’s “People” page is provided below:

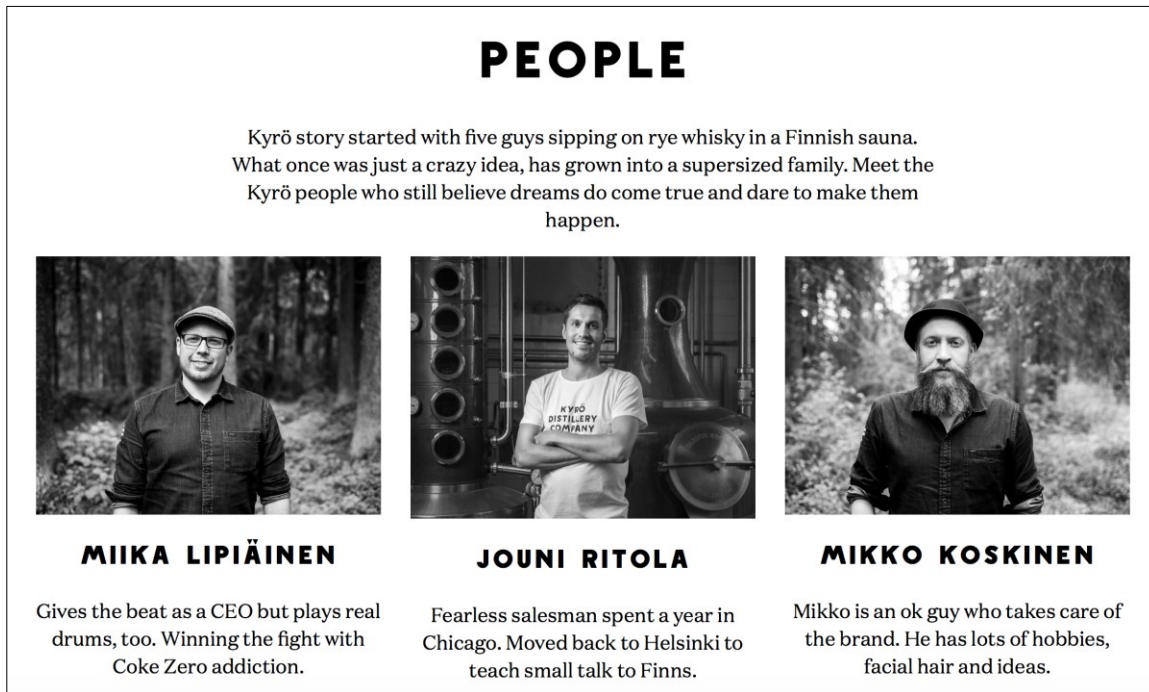


Image 1: Kyrö's "People" page on their website that introduces all of the company's employees.

The company calls its employees a "supersized family", and states on their website the Kyrö people as people, "*who still believe dreams do come true and dare to make them happen.*" On Kyrö's Instagram account, these same Kyrö people can be recognized from the posts in a Kyrö-like, personal way with mostly one-sentence-long very fitting captions that are either funny or relatable, or both (see Image 2). On the website, the "Contact us" page invites the website users to submit their concerns, and someone called Hansu will answer. This is a nice little detail that takes the company once again to a much more personal level giving the person answering the customer's questions a name (and a face on the "People" page), instead of the usual "we" that constitutes of some faceless person or persons within the company who will answer the questions.



Image 2: Instagram post by Kyrö (Nov 25, 2019): “Pros and cons working in a rye distillery”.

Also 3 kaveria reveals their names and faces to their customers, both on their website and on their Instagram account, making it easier for the customers to relate to these three characters that decided to start making ice cream together (see Image 3). All of their written material is written from the “we” perspective in a personal tone of voice that makes it obvious for the consumers to know that it actually is the three friends, Heikki, Ilkka, and Sauli, talking. The ice cream tubs include micro stories and have signatures of the three friends on them ensuring the consumers that the founders truly and proudly stand behind their products and their company. The brand’s Instagram account includes lots of happy customers consuming their ice cream, and many of the company’s posts even include reposts from their satisfied customers. Moreover, the company includes lots of the feedback they have gotten in their Instagram posts or pictures’ captions, which ensures new consumers of the excellence of the ice cream. Some of the feedback is cleverly

integrated on the website, where the ice cream flavors are introduced. The company invites consumers to “be friends”, and to follow them on social media, and their posts do feel like looking at a friend’s posts, as the example from Instagram below:



Image 3: Instagram post by 3 friends on Father’s Day (Nov 10, 2019), in which the three friends greet their followers and customers with a post introducing their story that started seven years earlier.

Aarni introduces itself to the consumers more on its website, where it has a brand video that tells the story of the three young boys playing in the forest, the boys growing up still being friends and sharing the same interests and a love for nature (see Image 4). The three founders are present in the video, and they also reveal their names on the website by signing the brand story making it yet again clear that they are the “we,” for instance, in “*we always have been, and always will be humbled by the beauty of nature.*” The company’s brand story is also told to the consumers in a written form on the website under the brand story video, and the following is a quotation of the written brand story:

“Years passed. In Helsinki, on the wooden benches of Pyry’s sauna, our paths crossed again. It must have been the second or third round in the heat already, when we realized that we all shared one thing in common – a strong passion to unique watches. Bearing in mind that we were all inspired by the beauty of our forests, we decided to take action. Yet we didn’t quite know how to combine these two passions of ours. Then our eyes set on the three watches we had left lying on a wooden table.”



Image 4: “The True Story of Aarni” brand video on Aarni’s website.

The other danish guy reveals the names of the founder friends in their brand video, but they seem to concentrate more on presenting different types of real people that represent their customers making it possible for the new consumers to believe that their products are suitable for every body type, age, and attitude. Even still, interviewing the CEO of the company, he highlights his wish not to remain so faceless to the customers of the company, which is illustrated in the following quotation:

“It didn’t feel nice at all to be sort of ‘faceless’, because faceless is always somewhat scary, and it’s difficult to know whether the motives of the faceless corporation are that innocent.

Thus, I wanted to tell that we have real people working here, and one of us came up with the idea that, 'hey, let's write something that we would want to say if this was a store and they would buy them, and we'd hand the boxers over the counter,' so what else we could say besides the price and thank you." (4)

They have come up with an idea that within every order comes a handwritten, personal note that greets the customer in some way making the order and service a whole lot more personal. Since the company does not have an actual physical store, this is their way to greet their customers personally, in a similar way they would do in an actual store when thanking the customer for his purchase. There are no rules of what to write in the imaginative notes, only the principle exists that the text cannot be offensive or humiliating. As the messages are handwritten and include a personal, well-thought text, this habit really demonstrates to the consumers that there are real people sending these packages and making an effort specifically to the customer receiving the order. The effort really seems to pay off because when following the companies' Instagram stories for two weeks, I came to notice how the customers of The other danish guy are sharing pictures of the hand-written notes on their Instagram stories one of them stating "The personal note = customer experience next level" (see Image 5 and 6). Two example screenshots of the "Instagram Stories are below:

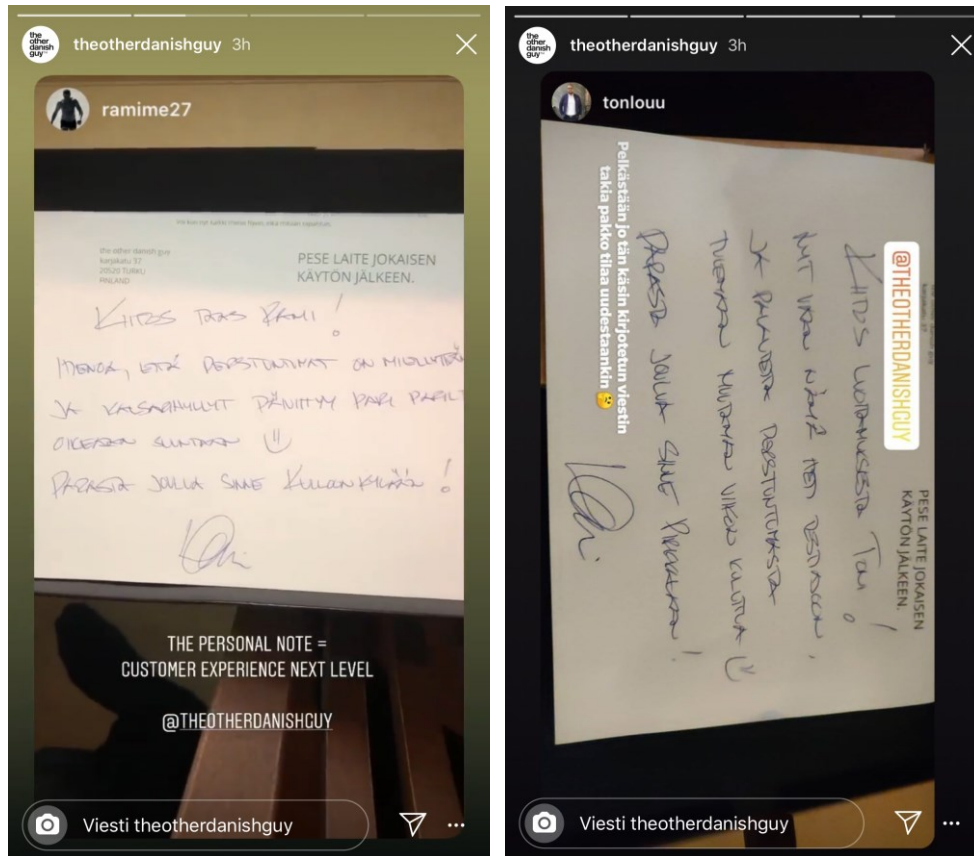


Image 5 and 6: The other danish guy's happy customers sharing their personal notes on their Instagram Stories.

4.1.3 Honesty and Transparency

The third theme that I identified within constructing authenticity is promoting honesty and transparency. Honesty as a concept is clearly related to telling the truth and being authentic, but transparency was something that also came up in the interviews. These two concepts together characterize the sample companies, as the companies wanted to remain true to themselves as well as honest and transparent to their consumers by also sharing some of the occurrences that did not necessarily go as planned, which, in turn, makes the companies more relatable and human for the consumers. The following quotations from the interviewees illustrate the companies' stance on honesty and transparency:

“In a way, we live this story of ours everyday. The brand story, from which everything started, is one part, but the story that we live everyday and write in a certain way every day produces situations, in which anything possible can happen. At times good things, at times not so good things. We don’t try to get away from them or make things sound any better, we just tell them the best way we can without making anything up.” (4)

“Then they [the stories] are kind of by a coincidence. Life is not so well planned at us, yet it is kind of really creative all the time. It’s part of it that random things happen, and they are part of our stories.” (1)

“--- We want to be sort of transparent. There are already lots of synthetically created brands in this world, so in order for us to stand out with our realness, it pays off to put things out there for people to find.” (2)

“Being humorous is connected to our tone of voice in the storytelling, as we can be open also about the things that didn’t necessarily go completely as planned or as expected or the things we couldn’t do or plan in advance.” (2)

It seems to be in the companies’ mindset to construct authenticity also through the different occurrences. Additionally, being transparent is linked to how the companies share their day-to-day life, which takes place mostly on Instagram (see Image 7 and 8) showing that the people behind the brands are ordinary people to whom ordinary things happen. This, however, did not necessarily apply to all of the companies, as Aarni’s Instagram account has a different style of being more serious by sharing beautiful images of nature or people wearing their products in nature. Even still, as the other companies were keen to show their ordinary days and lives, I found transparency as an interesting component that strongly applied to some of the storytelling. For Kyrö, sharing the daily life of the distillery has become especially important, since due to the Alcohol Act, advertising alcohol products is subject to legal restrictions in Finland, and advertising strong alcoholic beverages is completely forbidden. Thus, Kyrö has been forced to find other ways for branding the

company, unlike Aarni, who can post images and advertisements of its watches and sunglasses without any limits. This might have also been a positive thing for Kyrö, as they have been sort of forced to create a strong tone of voice that connects with the consumers without actually marketing the products.

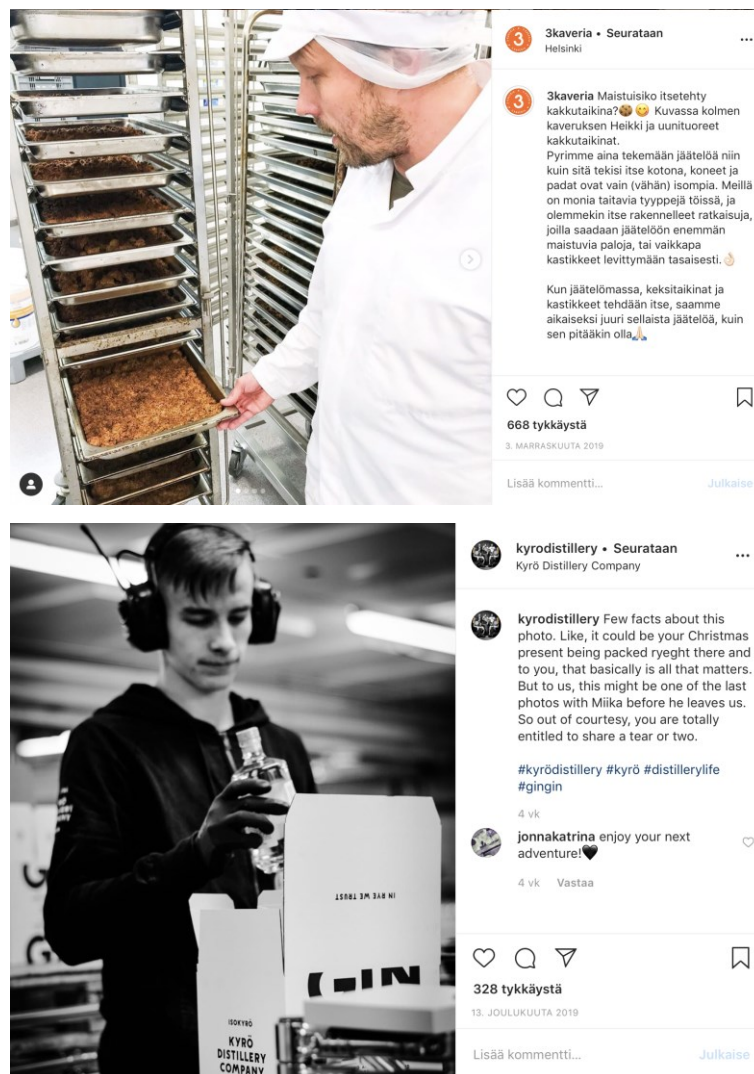


Image 7 and 8: Instagram posts by 3 kaveria (Nov 3, 2019) and Kyrö (Dec 13, 2019) sharing the daily-life of the brands.

According to my interview, The other danish guy does not have a social media strategy, but they are a good example of being transparent in other ways. Their brand story is all about transparency and honesty, as for many people the whole story would be so embarrassing that they would not want to tell it to anyone, yet this company has built the whole firm and its brand story on the embarrassing occurrence that happened on a business trip to New York. The following excerpt from their website concludes the nature of the company quite well:

“What started off as a joke slowly morphed into an amusing idea and finally into what you see here. We have been asked many times, where the brand name comes from. So, it is time to tell you, without saving any of the dirty details. For some of you this might be heavy stuff and some can even find the content inappropriate, if so; sorry. But this is how it happened. We’re just telling the truth.”

The company promotes self-confidence and is proudly themselves without feeling shame. They also swear by the name of honesty, and do not want to pretend to be anything they are not, or promote anything they would not themselves believe in.

4.1.4 The Use of Humor

The use of humor in the brand stories and online made these brands more personal and easily approachable, and also constituted in some of the brand authenticity. Again, Aarni has chosen a more serious and “cool” approach, but the other companies seemed to have integrated humor tight in their communication in their own personal ways. Humor is mentioned to be one of Kyrö’s company values, and it is truly present everywhere within the company, whether it is their website, their Instagram posts, or the seals on their GIN bottles. Kyrö has lots of play with words, for instance, their slogan says *“In rye we trust,”* which is cleverly invented from the motto of the United States (“In God We Trust”), and

on Instagram, they wish their customers and followers “Merry Christmas.” According to my interview, Kyrö is also known for a recognizable picture of the founders running naked in a rye field (see Image 9), which was originally taken for Jarkko Nikkanen’s book about Finnish whiskey culture. The founders wanted to take a picture of themselves in their own different and humorous style that would capture the audience’s attention surely, and the picture has remained part of Kyrö even years later.



Image 9: The iconic picture of the Kyrö founders in a rye field showing the viewer that the company wants to do things its own way.

For 3 kaveria, humor is also an essential part of their communication. According to my interview, the fun and the joyfulness of doing shows, and that is probably one of the reasons consumers send the company large amounts of feedback and love letters for their ice creams, as they find the three friends easily approachable. As the interviewee states, also the whole brand story of 3 kaveria delights the consumers:

“It has surely stuck in consumers’ minds that there are some middle-aged dudes who started making ice cream. Consumers find it funny.” (1)

As mentioned in the previous part, The other danish guy’s brand story is an embarrassing/funny occurrence that is told in a comedy show like way in their brand video. Without a doubt, humor is one of their main components, and it is incorporated also in more serious matters in their website, such as the video called “Caring Marine Life,” which justifies that the company truly cares about environment, and how their products are environmentally friendly. A marketing video called “Caring Own Ass” goes without saying being produced in a very humorous way. Also small details on their website add to the humorousness and personality of the company, for instance “TFAQ” (too frequently asked questions), or their slogan “Only three balls matter TM,” which refers to a man and the planet. The other danish guy has a very personal tone of voice, from which they can certainly be recognized, and according to my interview with them, it is a very essential part of their communication as a whole, either within the company or towards its customers, justifying their right to be.

4.1.5 Finnishness

The last theme constituting the authenticity is a so-called Finnishness (or Nordicness, in some cases). The sample companies currently have their biggest markets in Finland, even though some of them are seeking growth in foreign countries. Thus, they are targeting some, if not all, of their communication to the Finnish audience. Finnishness and Finnish elements are present in one way or another in all of these companies, which might influence and affect the Finnish consumers’ purchase decisions, as consuming these products might strengthen their national and social identity and feelings of belonging to a group (Carvalho et al., 2019). Finnishness is also an important part of promoting

authenticity as well as seeming authentic to both Finnish and foreign consumers. Two of the four companies tell that their company got started in a sauna, which is probably the most Finnish thing there can be. Unlike the other four companies, however, The other danish guy did not find such a big value of being a Finnish company or consciously promote Finnishness in any way.

Kyrö as a company has a huge amount of symbolism of being a Finnish company. The company's story begins in a sauna, and they state on their website:

“Like many great ideas (and half of the Finnish population), the idea for Kyrö Distillery Company was conceived in a sauna by a group of friends with a shared love of rye whisky.”

The names of the products Kyrö, Napue, and Koskue are all places or villages nearby where the distillery is located. Napue Gin was released on the 300th anniversary of the Battle of Napue, and the font of the company comes from the monument of the battle. The company has a visitor center located in Isokyrö, where the story of the distillery becomes alive. Local habits and beliefs might be exotic even for the Finnish population, as the village is somewhat off the map, and not a place where one would visit every day. Finnishness is also highlighted in the form of local ingredients, as the company uses domestic rye and herbs, and states on their website:

“True to our Finnish heritage, we do everything the hard way; even though it is the most demanding grain to distill, we only work with 100% whole-grain rye. In addition to the intense flavor of Finnish rye, our award-winning gins contain local wild botanicals foraged from right outside the distillery, contributing to the recognisable and unique flavour.”

Moreover, being a Finnish company is linked to Kyrö's set of values and the Finnish and Nordic ideal of not having differences in wealth in the way that Kyrö aims to produce

products that the so-called working class could afford at times, and make a moment special for them. The famous Finnish “sisu” (perseverance) and honesty are present in all of their doing in a humorous and personal way.

Aarni’s story also takes the consumer in a sauna, in which the three guys came up with the idea for the company. The core of the company is the Finnish nature that is present in the materials of their products, in all of their marketing material, on their website, as well as on their Instagram page, that according to their interviewee is sort of the company’s showcase in a way (see Image 10). The founders come from the small village of Klaukkala, Finland, where they were surrounded by nature, and grew up loving it. The love for nature can be seen in the following excerpt from their website stating:

“Our roots are deep in the Finnish wilderness and childhood treks into the forest. Three young boys’ adventures in the local forests laid the foundation for a lifelong friendship and ecologically sustainable values. --- Years flew past, but our thoughts and values about the pristine nature remained. It was the time for Aarni.”

Finnish nature is something that is worldwide admired, and it appeals to both Finnish and foreign customers. Aarni is proud of using wood as a material, and they use both Finnish and foreign wood without the promise of not endangering any species. According to their website, the name Aarni along with being a Finnish man’s name means, “wild, untamed forest untouched by the hands of man.” Aarni’s Instagram account is full of stunningly beautiful images of Finnish nature (see image 10), which promotes the Finnish product made of wooden material, but also possibly inspires foreigners to travel to Finland. The brand video also shows the beauty of Klaukkala and Helsinki in a powerful way, taking the viewer on a time travel from childhood to adulthood in Finland.

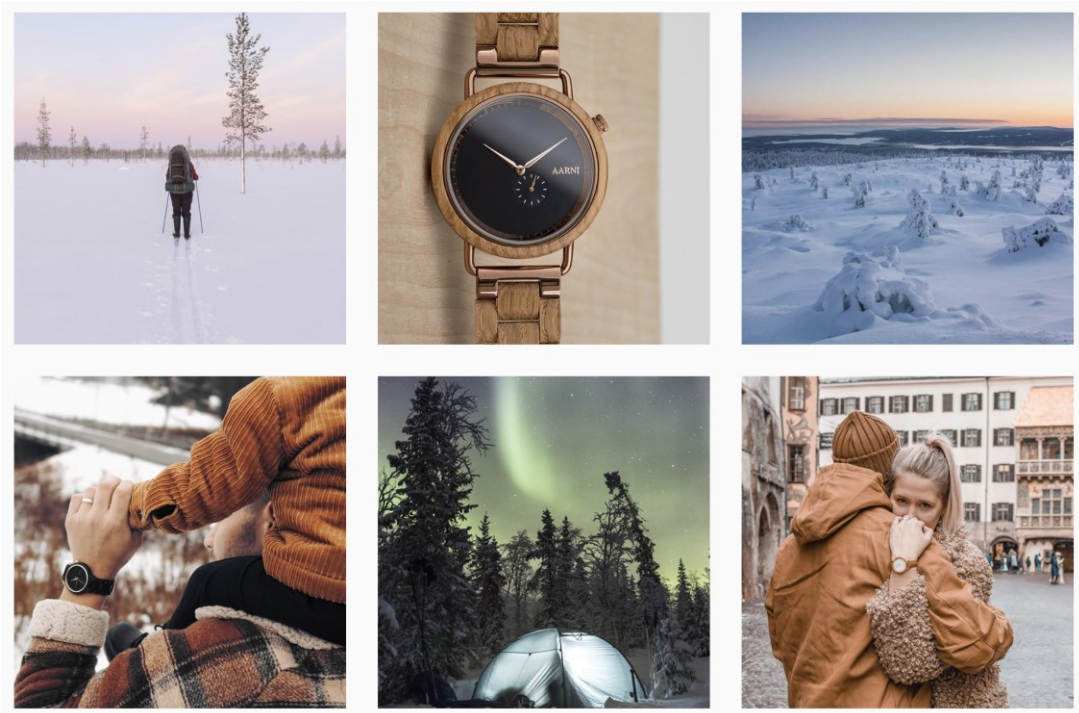


Image 10: Aarni's Instagram page functions as the company's showcase presenting stunning posts about nature and their products.

The ice cream company 3 kaveria currently sells their products in Finland and in Sweden. Their Finnishness is highlighted in Finland and for the Finnish consumers, as the company is proudly from Eastern Helsinki, and uses Finnish products as their main ingredients. They are known for their ice cream to be made from real and rich ingredients, and according to their website the products are made with “only ingredients that require no explanation” including Finnish milk and berries, and sauces they have made themselves. However, it is noteworthy that their website in English promotes the products to have Nordic milk and Nordic berries, which might sound better for the Swedish or other foreign customers. According to the interview with them, the company does indeed want to highlight being a Nordic company in Sweden. Still, their website announces quite proudly:

“MADE IN HELSINKI.

Sauna. Formula 1 drivers. Nokia. Honesty. The world’s happiest people.

We want to elevate Finnish ice cream to legendary status.”

This reveals that they are still very proud to be from Finland. Another aspect that promotes Finnishness are the “characters” of the three friends that are known to be humble and down-to-earth, without being too loud of their accomplishments, as also Finns are notoriously quite modest. The interviewee defines the “three friends” as typical Finnish characters by describing them as follows:

“I do notice that it has become clear what type of people the three friends are, like they want to come out as modest people, they are really down-to-earth. And they are also very humble, at least in my eyes. I see it so that they are extremely self-effacing in a way that even if something really great happens, they’d lay low without wanting to make a big deal about it.”

(1)

Lastly, one of the Finnish companies is a little bit confusingly named as “the other Danish guy”, which originates from the brand story, and how the founders were mistakenly thought to be Danish. The brand might identify more as a Nordic company than a Finnish one, although for the Finnish consumers visiting their website, it becomes clear rather quickly that they are actually Finnish, not Danish. The confusing name has also brought the company some welcoming confusion, as Danish people in general might stereotypically be considered more liberal and without such strict boundaries and seriousness, as Finns might be. This is in line with the concept of “product country image” (Magnusson et al., 2011), which means that the perceived country of origin might sometimes make a product or brand more attractive than the actual country-of-origin. Their interviewee explains the connotation of the name of the company below:

“Danes are maybe thought to be a more raunchy crowd than us [Finns] stereotypically. --- There is a much more liberal and permissive attitude towards everything. --- Maybe it allows us a some kind of freedom to be a little different.” (4)

Along with the possible freedom, the interesting name of the company has also brought the company some wanted attention, as it invites the consumer ask questions and find out more about the brand and its story. It is interesting to notice that website of the company has much more content on the Finnish site than on the international one, and thus, the Finnish customer gets closer and more personal with the brand. On the Finnish site, The other danish guy has included a page called “Stories”, that reveals stories of different Finnish men that have somehow lost and found their self-confidence. One of the characters is Santa Claus, which could be thought as a symbol for Finnishness. Moreover, the brand highlights honesty, which is known to be sort of a very Finnish thing, even though it might not be the most obvious one for someone who is not at all familiar with the Finnish culture.

4.2 Building Emotional Connection

The second research question (“How is emotional branding exploited in these brand stories?”) aims to find out what kind of role the emotional branding plays within these companies, and how emotions are created through the brand stories. As mentioned earlier, storytelling itself is a form of emotional branding, and brand stories are a great way to build a deeper and long-lasting relationship between the brand and the consumer (Góbe, 2001; Kim & Sullivan, 2019; Garg et al., 2018). Based on the interviews and my analysis on the websites and Instagram accounts, I was able to come up with two themes that affect forming an emotional connection between the brand and the consumer. These themes include how the company aims to purposefully create certain predetermined emotions as well as how it appeals to consumers’ emotions; and how the company promotes its company values giving the consumers other ways to identify with the brand how the

consumers identify with the brand (see Diagram 3). Even though these themes might be somewhat overlapping and simultaneous, they also differ from each other so that the first one aims to “push” certain emotions to consumers’ minds more actively, while the latter creates an atmosphere in which consumers’ emotions are welcome to form more passively, based on and in accordance with the company’s own beliefs and valuations. I will elaborate and give example of these themes in the following parts.

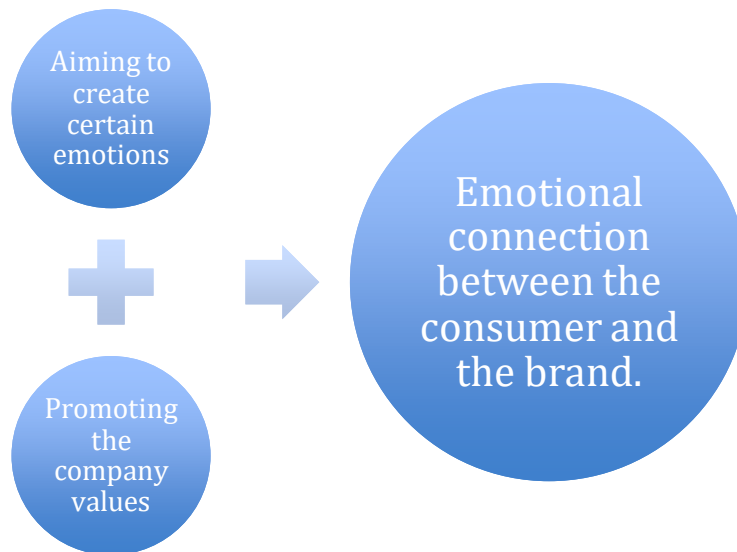


Diagram 3: The themes that build emotional connection between the brand and the consumer

4.2.1 Aiming to Create Certain Emotions

On the basis of my analysis, I suggest that the sample companies do indeed rather actively aim to create certain emotions among their customers with their brand stories and other ways of branding. Brands also use different campaigns and ways to appeal directly to consumers’ emotions by taking a stance on a matter that is important or timely for today’s consumers. Some of the companies have specified and named the desired emotions or

emotional acts in advance more carefully, and others just generally wish to evoke emotions within their customers without naming them in advance. The following quotations illustrate the sample companies' views on aiming to generate predetermined emotions and feelings in their costumers:

“Well, we aim to create an atmosphere that welcomes people to get together in a similar way that we did in that sauna, over a shared inspiration or a dream, and maybe even would have the courage to proceed to fulfill it. So sort of that inspiration or dreaming, although I’m not sure if those count as emotions, but that’s what we aim to generate. --- Also the feelings of self-confidence and braveness. As well as having fun!” (2)

“We aim for a brand connotation that resonates with people in a way that evokes some kind of feelings in them.” (3)

“We don’t necessarily intend to produce any specific feelings. Of course we understand that when we say something out loud, it might evoke many different types of feelings. But it’s never like we’d want to irritate, or touch, or make people laugh. In my opinion, it’s quite bad if you have to indicate when you try to be funny. It feels sort of awkward to me. --- We tell a story and see where it leads to.” (4)

The different emotions or emotional acts that I was able to identify within these sample companies by my analysis include the feeling of freedom, escaping the hectic daily-life, being brave, feeling self-confident, dreaming and pursuing to a dream, feeling inspired, feeling nostalgic, believing in oneself and one’s own success, having fun carelessly, getting together with friends, and connecting with nature.

Some of these emotions are the same within these sample companies, and some are more important to some of the companies. For instance, what Aarni wishes to underline the most, are the feelings of freedom and one’s connection with nature (see Image 11). Their interviewee describes their current focus on emotional branding as follows:

“Our current focus is sort of on concentrating on one’s relationship with nature, how everyone has their personal relationship with nature. We want to sort of bring that up in our own story, and reinforce that in our products and bring it as part of the daily life. --- We also want to underline the feeling of freedom, such as when you are out there in the forest, or wherever sailing in the sea, or skiing in the mountains. Whatever your personal nature relationship is is linked to freedom and feeling free and being away from the hectic everyday life.” (3)

Their focus is on the nature relationship that can reinforce the feeling of being free of responsibilities and normal daily-life for a while, while escaping in nature to calm down and sort of finding serenity and peace, and through that getting more energized. The Instagram example below has a caption by Katrina Mayer stating, “Time spent amongst trees is never wasted time,” which illustrates the very core of the company.

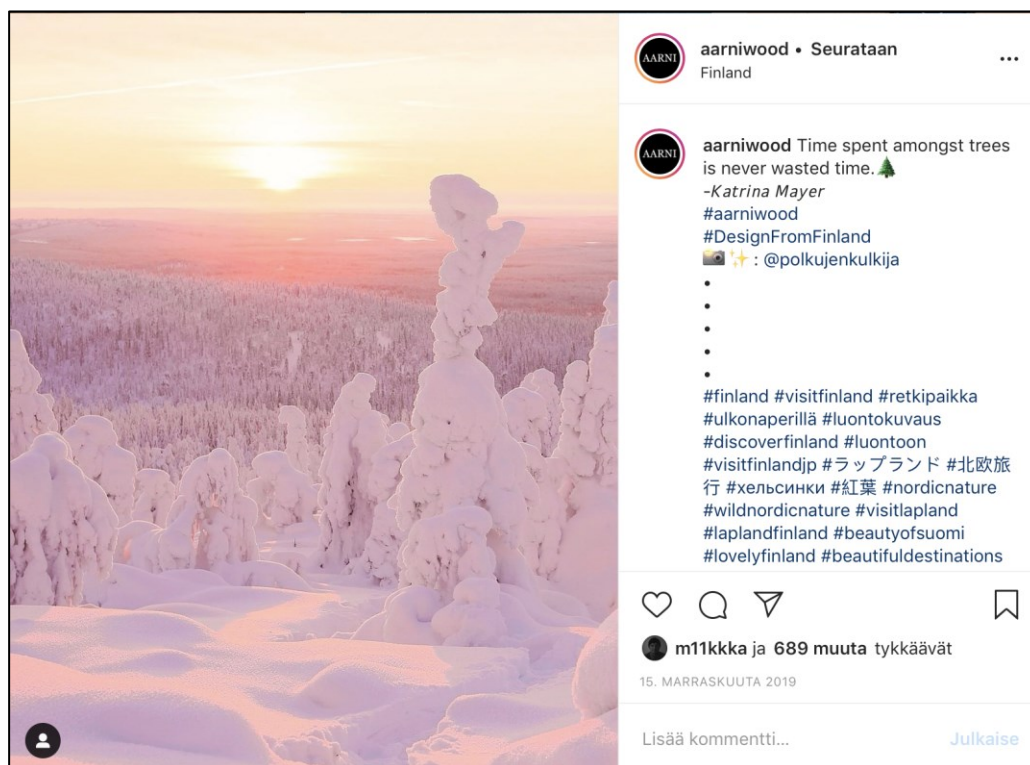


Image 11: Aarni's Instagram post (Nov 15, 2019) saying "Time spent amongst trees is never wasted time."

Another example I want to present is Aarni and its special edition wooden watches from the linden trees of Mechelininkatu; Mechelininkatu Limited Edition. Mechelininkatu is a well-known street in Helsinki, which beloved linden trees were taken down in summer 2017. Many people in Helsinki were very upset about this, as trees are what bring nature in the city, and apparently even grave candles were brought to the scene. Aarni managed to give the trees a new life cycle, and offered an opportunity for the people with strong emotional bonds to these trees (or anyone whatsoever) to purchase them and cherish the special history of the material. Thus, the story of Mechelininkatu's trees was brought to be part of Aarni's story. The 300 watches launched in the summer 2018 were quickly sold out. Aarni aims to launch more special editions similar to this in the future, and give special trees the value they deserve.

The other danish guy, in turn, aims to strengthen a man's (as the underwear brand is targeted to men) self-confidence and braveness to proudly be himself, despite the possible struggle he has been through and the mistakes he has made. The core of the company is being able to trust oneself, being honest to oneself and to others, and having the courage to be self-confident no matter what. The company presents six profiles of different men and their rather personal stories on their website with the following text:

"When you ask ordinary men to be photographed in their underwear, self-confidence needs to be okay in both sides. We talked with a few different men about self-acceptance, and self-confidence, and we heard some fine stories. As you can notice from the pictures, self-confidence and a great pair of underwear indeed has a lot in common: both are visible."

These profiles include, for instance, a recovering alcoholic, a man with dwarfism, 50-year-old Janne, and Santa Claus. All these men are somehow talking about self-confidence and self-acceptance, and how they might have through some kind of struggle found their confidence or acceptance or get them back. All of them are wearing underwear from The

other danish guy, referring to the fact that their underwear is also supposed to fit any body type. Moreover, as these men are not models, posing in underwear shows their self-confidence strongly, and how the company believes that confidence is ultimately up to what is inside of one's head, not up to one's looks or size. There is a text on the website saying roughly translated "*you do not need to look for yourself anymore in other people's opinions,*" which is the core of the company of trusting oneself and believing in oneself by accepting one's faults and deficiencies. Having self-confidence and self-acceptance is something that many people in today's world struggle with one way or another, and The other danish guy wants to help men to achieve it. The photo (see Image 12) on the company's front page on their website shows different body types of men standing confidently in a row wearing underwear from the brand.



Image 12: Picture of The other danish guy “models” representing self-confidence on the company’s website.

The other two brands are more focused on bringing people together. 3 kaveria is a happy brand that invites consumers to join together to enjoy ice cream and have fun, whether it is

with friends or family. Kyrö's wish is to bring people together in a similar way that the five friends got together in a sauna, possibly over a shared dream and idea, an inspiration that could lead to the group of friends to start accomplishing it. As alcohol is also known for having a negative connotation of tearing families and friends apart, Kyrö, on the contrary, wants to bring people together. One example of that is their Barrel Sales that invites a group of people to share a barrel of rye whiskey for at least three years while it matures in the Isokyrö distillery. This experience brings these people together for at least three years, while they get to sample their product during the project, and at the end get a bottle of it to share. The company is also all about believing in oneself, as sometimes a crazy dream or idea can become reality, even though it might have seemed very unlikely or impossible in the beginning. As their interviewee states, it is rather easy to identify with the story of the company.

4.2.2 Promoting the Company Values

Through my analysis, I came to notice that an emotional bond can be also built by promoting the company values in different ways. This is a more passive way of emotional branding, as the company creates a frame in which it itself believes in, and the consumers are welcome to join if their personal values match those of the company. As the company values represent the core of the company and the most important things the company stands for, brand stories and other storytelling are an easy channel for brands to incorporate these ideas in their communication. Thus, stories are often used as a means to communicate brand values, to which consumers can relate and commit to through a positive brand image (Lundqvist et al., 2012; Huang, 2010). Along with the communication, a brand's behavior reflects its core values and norms (Fritz et al., 2017). For instance, one of the interviewees describes their company values in the excerpt below:

"Let's see, our values are not set in stone, but they come from what kind of people we are,

sort of based on that. Maybe I'd say that the sort of diversity and openness and freedom, are the values we promote. We have lots of different kinds of people working for us, and we are a very 'flat' type of organization, meaning that everyone sits around the same table without much hierarchy. We are also very permissive, that's an important one." (1)

As noted in the Literature Review, brands can provide consumers with identity value acting as platforms for self-expression if brands embody the ideals consumers admire, and as an example, make him look successful or family oriented in the eyes of others (Holt, 2004; Schembri & Merrilees, 2001). Many consumers might find the aforementioned diversity and openness as something they identify with and even idealize. One company mentions humor as one of their five values, and the following excerpt captures their outlook on life through humor in a relatable way:

"And we also want to lower the threshold for fulfilling one's dreams, to which humor is very suitable. In a way it made no sense computationally that we started doing this, but we didn't let that bother us. In a way, that functions as a humorous example that not everything needs to be taken so seriously. Sometimes you can just try to do it." (2)

The interviewees also stressed the brands having their specific tone of voice, meaning that they communicate in a certain, systematic way, creating the brand a specific brand personality. Identifying with a brand might gain the consumer access to a certain group, or he might experience feelings of belonging. Using the underwear of The other danish guy might make the person feel confident, or using Aarni's wooden sunglasses might make the consumer feel like one of the "cool people". Kyrö's references to Finnish heritage and culture might be very important and precious aspect to someone coming from Isokyrö or nearby, and they might be proud of their roots and home village's history. Environmental concerns and values are also a remarkable subject that awakens strong emotions and opinions within consumers, and many consumers seek to make responsible purchase decisions, and want to identify with brands that are known to be environmentally friendly

and promote sustainability. The other danish guy and Aarni take a strong stance on the matter, as The other danish guy's products are made of Smoothshell™ fabric made of regenerated nylon, which helps reducing the plastic waste from oceans and beyond, while Aarni only uses natural materials that come from sustainable and responsible sources. Also 3 kaveria and Kyrö are proud to use Finnish, local ingredients in their products.

4.3 The Importance of Using Brand Stories

Lastly, with the third research question (“Why is storytelling viewed important?”) I hoped to identify some arguments and benefits of storytelling in brand building in general, and possibly additionally predict the direction that branding via storytelling might take in the near future. All of the interviewees agreed that storytelling has been beneficial if not even crucial for their company's success. Stories are how these companies are remembered and how their brand awareness is spread. I have divided this last part in two, and the first half will consider the current significance of storytelling according to the brands interviewed, and the latter the possible significance of brand stories in the near future, also based on the interviews.

4.3.1 Current Significance of Storytelling

All the brands that I interviewed agreed that storytelling is very significant to their companies, and it is what helps their brands to be remembered and stay on the minds of the consumers. As I have stated earlier, companies with an engaging brand story are generally successful in creating strong and long lasting bonds to their customers (Huang, 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2012; Rauhala & Vikström, 2014; Dahlén et al., 2010; etc.), which seems to hold true according to my analysis on these brands. Interviewees describe the overall importance of storytelling as follows:

“It [storytelling] sure is a big part. Especially the fact that we can tie this brand being a part of this story in a way creates the base for the brand, sort of gives it ‘flesh on the bones’. A brand without any kind of brand story leaves the brand somewhat vacuous. It’s a remarkable part of it!” (3)

“It [storytelling] is everything. It truly is everything. Without a story, there is nothing.” (4)

The sample companies all agreed that storytelling is present in every single step they take:

“Sure on social media and on the website and such. And actually really also on our brochures, and tastings, and events we also tell our story, so it does come up with everything we do. For instance, if someone pays a visit to us, we oftentimes tell them how this all got started. So it really is cross-cutting.” (1)

“We strive to tie our whole brand strongly to it. Everything between our Instagram and our marketing material, we attempt to tie to it.” (3)

“...if I start from what branding is, it is sort of the world that the company creates and invites people into it through meeting its customers, as well as through visual materials, products, spaces, etc. And through storytelling, the company is able to create the brand’s world possibly better than through any other way. --- Especially for this kind of Start-up Company, without a big budget for marketing, storytelling is a way that is easy on the pocket to do brand building and strengthen the brand image.” (2)

As the previous quotations illustrate, social media is seen as an important tool. Brands can get their voices heard on social media, which no longer requires huge financial investments on branding, unlike before with the expensive advertising campaigns (Kohli et al., 2015). Social media, and especially Instagram is seen as a remarkable channel for storytelling, and one of the interviewees elaborates their use of social media as follows:

“Instagram is important, and so is Facebook. On Instagram, the function of Instagram Stories is something we have started using more and more. It allows us somehow better show what’s going on than only having one picture with a caption.” (2)

All the sample companies stress that storytelling as a part of their branding strategy has increased their brand awareness, and an important part of it is the word-of-mouth effect that happens among their consumers. The interviewee from 3 kaveria notes that consumers find it funny how the three middle aged men turned around their lives and started making ice cream from scratch. She adds that word-of-mouth is in a significant role in their company, as people love to tell their story further, and the ice cream flavors are extremely recommended. They have been referred as the Nordic Ben & Jerry’s, which might further consumers’ recognition of them. Kyrö has a “hidden element” on their bottles, a mandatory seal in the form of a seal, and whoever knows its background, gets to tell the story further, adding to the company’s recognition. Even though The other danish guy does not actively use social media or Instagram, they reveal that their customers post tons of pictures of the handwritten notes that come with their products, and through that their brand awareness gets spread the best possible way. Also Aarni seems to have lots of consumers sharing their purchases on Instagram, and Aarni sharing these images and content further on the company’s Instagram stories.

According to the interviews, all the companies themselves are responsible for storytelling, but the stories that get chosen to be revealed to their audiences, are chosen on the principle of carefully thinking of what might interest and resonate with the consumers:

“Consumers maybe affect less to it, well, or less storytelling comes directly from them. But whatever then resonates with them, is practically extremely important, and those things get chosen as a part of the story.” (2)

“So far it has been coming from us. But surely we also plan to get customers more involved. We have one project coming up, in which our purpose is to share content and stories from our customers and not-yet-customers.” (3)

As I stated before, also some of the content produced by the consumers gets shared. According to the interviewee, Kyrö has at times invited influencers to promote their events, such as the yearly event Kyröfest that takes place every August in their distillery. The influencers get to tell Kyrö’s story through their personal experience in their own channels to their own follows. The use of bloggers and other influencers might be a remarkable factor for a consumption choice along with increasing the brand awareness (Helal et al., 2018). Kyrö has also formed some partnerships, one of them being a Japanese Ki No Bi distillery. These partnerships have been inspired and formed through an encounter, and they aim to tell the brand’s story again with different and new ways.

4.3.2 Brand Stories in the Future

It is impossible to predict the future, but some careful conjectures can still be made. As all of the interviewees agreed on the current significance of storytelling, they do also believe that it will be an essential factor for a company’s success in the future. One of the interviewees states that he sees the significance of storytelling in the future to be enormously important, and that the curating of the brand-oriented stories with the consumer-oriented stories will take place:

“I would say that enormously big. And I see it so that the curating of the company’s storytelling and the consumers’ storytelling will increase and get an important role, and instead of having only stories defined by the company, I see it so that it goes to the point in which the company might bring up more consumers’ personal storytelling about the brand.” (2)

Another interviewee agrees that storytelling will become ever more important for the brand, and that making purchase decisions based on the product attributes only, especially what comes to premium brands, might be gone. He brings up authenticity, and believes that for the customers in the future, authenticity will be valued even more than what it is now. His view is quoted below:

“I believe that it will still be pronounced more in the future. Like, the time in the past, when people would only base their consumption choices on the attributes of the products is probably history. Of course it depends much on the product as well, for instance a toothpaste can be bought because of its features or ingredients, but in the product categories of watches, clothing, cars, well, the more expensive products that indicate and symbolize something else than a piece of consumer goods, it will surely become more important. And, linked to this especially that authenticity and the sort of truthful stories, instead of some polished marketing-friendly images.” (3)

Great (authentic) stories compared to good stories will make a big difference in brand building and in the brand's success. Adding brand stories to already established brands might become a trend, although it might also make the company seem shallow or not authentic:

“Many other firm or brand might already have a ready made product, when they wake up to that storytelling, and start gluing some kind of brand story afterwards, which might turn out to be a more difficult process.” (3)

As brands seek to go global, it is important to note that some stories do not work in different countries and cultures, as context may need to be understood. As one of the interviewees notes, much attention needs to be paid to the context when telling the (brand) stories. According to him, it is a very interesting challenge to find those kinds of stories that are globally or universally applicable:

“The way, in which the company is able to find the kinds of stories that resonate with people globally or universally is a very, very interesting challenge. And that is what we are solving at the moment. In our case so that almost all cultures have some kind of a well-known, recognizable story, in which when getting into an adventure, it seems unlikely to succeed, but then everything turns out okay after different occurrences take place. And once you have a sort of a universal background for the story, the brand story needs to fit in it so that it is recognizable and relatable enough. That’s a must if a company seeks to export.” (2)

All and all, the competition might be tougher in the future, and as one of the interviewees emphasizes *“great stories from mediocre stories will mean much more in brand building in the future.”* (3) Storytelling is what will differentiate a brand from its competitors and make it easier for consumers to remember the brand.

5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, my aim is to uncover the meaning, importance, and relevance of the results of this thesis by comparing them with the earlier academic research. The chapter is again organized in the order of the three research questions (1. How do small Finnish companies brand and differentiate themselves by creating “authentic” brand stories? 2. How is emotional branding exploited in these brand stories? and 3. Why is storytelling viewed important?).

5.1 The Controversy of Being Authentic

There is an interesting controversy between the sample brands and the literature I reviewed. All of the four companies based their existence on authenticity and had strong opinions on the importance of being an “authentic” company. According to these brands, authenticity is what really speaks to the consumers, and that an unauthentic brand is not necessarily able to create similarly long lasting bonds with their consumers because not being authentic or having a truthful brand story in a way underestimates the consumers. By examining the sample companies, I was able to identify five different elements or themes that constitute brand authenticity. One of the most important ones was having a truthful brand story of how the brand came to being. The founders were proud of their story, and told it enthusiastically. However, various sources of previous literary (Huang, 2010; Beverland, 2005; Lundqvist et al., 2012; Ruy et al., 2019) all agree that a brand story does not need to be truly authentic as long as it seems as it could be true and fits in the

consumer's mindset and set of values. It is up to the audience to decide whether they perceive the brand story as authentic, despite of the actual truthfulness of the story, because if the story fits in the audience's reality, it can easily be seen as authentic (Huang, 2010). The consumers, thus, have the authority to decide what is perceived as authentic and what is not, because they are the ones judging the company and the brand (Peterson, 2005). It would be interesting to find out, whether in these cases that Peterson (2005) and Huang (2010) refer to, the consumers truly cannot tell the difference of a company and its brand story being authentic, or whether they just do not care so much. Moreover, it would be engrossing to learn, whether the consumers' perception of a brand would change after they would realize that the brand would not be authentic, after first believing it to be truthful in every way. In other words, how this misunderstanding would affect the brand image, or would it have an effect on it.

Out of the themes constituting in brand authenticity (truthful brand story, real people, honesty and transparency, humor, and Finnishness) that I identified in the previous chapter, it would probably be the easiest to come up with a fictional brand story, because that is what happened in the past and it might not be so much present in the brand's daily life if the company chooses so. According to Beverland (2005), if the brand story seems sincere and believable, it does not need to be true word by word. I would argue that the other elements of authenticity would be more difficult to fake, although something could be said to be "Finnish," and that could pass the judgments of non-Finns, yet it would be more difficult to convince Finnish people. Of course, not all brands even aim to be authentic, or come up with a brand story. There are lots of companies that choose to leave their brand without a story or choose not to put any faces on their founders or employees. In some industries, promoting a touching brand story or introducing the founders would seem unnecessary, or even ridiculous, if the company was selling cheap toilet paper or toothpaste, for instance. Thus, having an authentic brand story, or having a brand story at all, is not always even needful. Still, investigating a company with some made up elements would enlighten the matter more, because it is difficult to understand the significance of

authenticity by studying only companies with authentic brand stories.

5.2 Can a Brand Define How You Should Feel

The earlier research emphasizes the importance of emotional branding, and how generating somewhat predetermined emotions can connect the brand and the consumer in a profound way that later comes to determine brand loyalty (Góbe, 2001; Kim & Sullivan, 2019; Garg et al., 2018). Góbe (2018) stresses that emotional branding creates personal dialogue between the brand and its consumers, and invites the consumer into the brand's specific world. My findings are somewhat in line with this research, as the sample companies did seem to want to create the emotional connection between themselves and their customers. I came up with two themes that constitute in building this emotional connection (creating certain predetermined emotions, and promoting the company values).

However, according to Garg et al. (2018), brands should identify in advance the specific emotion that would be best suitable for building this special bond and connection. One of the interviewees made me question this, as he believed that feelings are such a subjective matter that it is difficult, if not impossible, for a company to define beforehand, which feeling the consumer is supposed to feel. He reasoned that when a company tries too hard to be of certain kind or aims to bear too specific feelings, it loses its authenticity in a way, and in worst-case scenario its customers and employees both end up feeling uncomfortable. Hence, maybe the point in creating emotions and building an emotional connection lies more in the ability to make the consumers feel. Make them feel something that will make them identify with the brand, or in some cases even first make them question the brand, and arouse their interest to find out more, the key still being able to identify or agree with the brand in the end.

Sort of similar reasoning goes for criticizing Rauhala & Vikström's (2014) view on it

being mandatory for the brand to understand its target audience, and what specific thing persuades and works for them making them identify with the brand. Of course it is without a doubt a good idea to have some kind of idea of the target market and the target customers, but as one of the interviewees points out, it might leave something essential out if the brand tries too hard to speak to a specific type of consumer leaving the other possible and prospective customers out. Again, it is best if the brand can be true to itself and remain authentic without trying too hard. Góbe's (2001) view on today's customers' expectation of their favorite brands to be able to know them both intimately and individually, with a solid understanding of their needs and cultural orientation, holds true when the brand wants to target itself to a small and homogeneous target group. Although, even then, the group consists of individuals with different backgrounds, needs, and values, and it might, thus, be impossible to respond to their specific needs profoundly, unless the company is able to offer very personalized and tailored service. Thus, it can be concluded that emotions do play a very important role for companies' branding strategies, yet it might be a good idea to leave space for the consumers to explore their feelings and emotions in tranquility.

5.3 The Strength of Being Spontaneous

Storytelling for these sample brands was their lifeline and their whole company was based on it and tied to it. All the brands had their truthful brand stories that were told by the truthful founders of the companies. In accordance with the views of Rauhala & Vikström (2014), Huang (2010), Lundqvist et al. (2012), and Dahlén et al. (2010), brand stories are a great way to be remembered and stand out from the competitors. Nonetheless, Rauhala & Vikström (2014) emphasize that storytelling needs to be goal-oriented to really make sense and be useful for the company. This was something that the interviewees did not truly agree with, because they highlighted their storytelling to be more spontaneous and rising from the events and occurrences the brands go through. Once again, this flexibility was one

of the facts that made the brands more authentic, as they did not force their communication in any way, but remained true to themselves and their personalities. Obviously, the brands paid attention to their Instagram posts to be in line with their personal style, but lots of the topics and subject matters came from ordinary things. Thus, I would argue that the storytelling could be goal-oriented in that way that the company resonates with their audience and manages to keep their own personal style, but it is not good idea to have too strict boundaries and objectives, as the company might then lose its “soul”.

Both the previous research (e.g. Brown et al., 2003; Harmeling et al. 2017) and the interviewees stated that the roles of storytellers have blurred and changed making the customers the storytellers of the company more and more often. This was also seen as the direction in the future. Van Laer et al. (2019) stress that the credibility of the brand stories may increase with the storytellers being the actual users of the brand instead of the company’s employees and brand owners, because other consumers might find it easier to trust their fellow consumers. Again, it would be interesting to investigate how the brand ambassadors or other consumers of the brands view deal with inauthenticity, in the cases when the brand is not authentic and has a made-up brand story or other made-up elements. According to Kohli et al. (2015), due to social media, the power has shifted into consumers’ favor, and the communication truly flows both ways, and not only from the brand to its consumer.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this last chapter, my intention is to summarize my research briefly, present the main findings, and introduce the conclusions of this study. I will shortly discuss practical implications of the results and findings of this thesis, bring forward the limitations of this study that I have conducted, and lastly, give out suggestions for further research relevant to this topic.

6.1 Research summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the concept of storytelling as a way of brand building from the company perspective. The study was geared toward examining the themes of authenticity and emotional branding in storytelling and brand stories. The study was motivated by the lack of research on storytelling and brand stories, especially on those that would focus on the company perspective, as well as the lack of understanding the significance of authenticity and emotions for storytelling. The research questions that the study set out to answer were threefold: 1) How do small Finnish companies brand and differentiate themselves by creating “authentic” brand stories?; 2) How is emotional branding exploited in these brand stories?; and 3) Why is storytelling viewed important? The research methods of the study consisted of a semi-structured reflective interview as well as analyzing the sample companies’ websites and Instagram accounts. The sample consisted of four small or relatively small Finnish companies, and thus four interviews

were conducted and transcribed into a written form. The analysis method that I then used to make sense of the data was thematic analysis, through which I intended to find repetitions, similarities and differences, and transitions by color-coding the material. I was able to find lots of similarities in the sample brands and their way of thinking.

As a result of the analysis of four semi-structured interviews, seven pages of notes of the websites, and altogether 100 Instagram posts along with two weeks' Instagram Stories, it could be concluded that authenticity functioned as a building block and base for the companies' existence, and it is exploited in different ways, while emotional branding operated as a means to construct an emotional and long-lasting connection between the brand and the consumers. Storytelling was seen as a vital element for the success of these companies, and it was believed to remain important in the future as well. The five themes that the companies differentiated themselves by creating authentic brand stories included truthful brand story, real people, honesty and transparency, the use of humor, and Finnishness. Out of these, the first two turned out to be the most crucial ones for the sake of authenticity, and they were extensively highlighted in the sample. Based on my analysis, having an authentic brand story was seen as the base for these companies' existence, and having real people as the brand's "characters" was vital for supporting the authentic brand story.

The brands built the emotional connection by aiming to create (predetermined) emotions by appealing to consumers' emotions together with promoting the company values that offered consumers new ways to identify with the brands. The predetermined emotions and emotional acts that I was able to identify through my analysis within these companies included: the feeling of freedom, escaping the hectic daily-life, being brave, feeling self-confident, dreaming and pursuing to a dream, feeling inspired, feeling nostalgic, believing in oneself and one's own success, having fun carelessly, getting together with friends, and connecting with nature. These were also connected to the companies' values, which offered the consumers more ways to identify themselves with the brands. According to my

analysis, promoting the company values was seen as a more passive way of emotional branding, while aiming to create the predetermined emotions was thought as a more active form of it.

The main findings of the study are somewhat in line with the previous research, although some differences occurred as well. As explicitly described in the previous chapter Chapter 5, the sample companies found authenticity much more determinative than the previous literature. My analysis of these companies revealed that they valued authenticity and telling truthful brand stories over trying to be something that they are not. They also sincerely believed that their consumers would value authenticity as much. Thus, there was a controversy compared to the previous literature on authenticity and brand stories. Some differences also appeared within the concept of emotional branding, and whether it is necessary to predetermine the emotions that the company aims to evoke in its customers. There were also differences between the interviewees' views on this, as some companies had predetermined the emotions or emotional acts more precisely than the others who simply wanted to generate some kind of emotions in their customers.

6.2 Practical implications

The findings of this study suggest that there are several different ways that construct the authenticity of a brand. According to the sample companies, it is indeed an important factor for a brand to remain authentic, as it is much more motivating for the employees to work in the company as well as its customers to consume the brand. Out of the different themes constructing brand authenticity, most attention should be paid to have a truthful brand story with real and truthful characters, since these are the most important elements that help the consumers to identify with the brand. On the one hand, it could be argued that it is reasonable for a brand to predetermine the emotions it desires to evoke and provoke in

its consumers. Yet, on the other hand, it could be said that too strict boundaries and predeterminations might, in fact, constrain the formation of the emotional bond. Either way, generating emotions will reinforce the connection between the brand and the consumer. Lastly, the findings of this study suggest that more attention should be paid to storytelling in the future, as it will be a crucial factor that can differentiate a brand from its competitors. To conclude, the should remain true to itself and its customers without pretending to be something else than what it truly is.

6.3 Limitations of the study

Even though this graduate thesis was implemented as a qualitative research, in other words, it did not seek to find any concrete statistically representative quantitative findings, the sample is still relatively small including only four companies. All of the companies operate in Finland, and accordingly, the findings of this study apply in the Finnish context only. As the main data collection method was a semi-structured reflective interview, the answers of the interviewees are their subjective views and experiences. As the author of this thesis I was not a very experienced interviewer, thus, someone more experienced could have possibly gotten more out of the interviews by crafting different kinds of questions. What comes to interpreting the data and piecing together the findings, I tried my best to remain objective, but undoubtedly my own opinions effected in the background as typical for human nature. Moreover, because of the qualitative nature of the study, care should be taken in generalizing the results, as the sample of the study is biased including only companies with authentic brand stories (although this was not a know fact when selecting the sample). The results and the whole scope of the study could have been different if the sample companies did not represent authenticity as much.

6.4 Suggestions for further research

The present study suggests that more investigation regarding brand authenticity is needed, as there was a prominent controversy between the views of the sample companies and the literature I reviewed (Huang, 2010; Beverland, 2005; Lundqvist et al., 2012; Ruy et al., 2019, etc.). The possible direction for further research, therefore, includes examining companies that are not authentic, and who, for instance, utilize a fictitious brand story, and how they view themselves and brand authenticity as a concept. Additionally, another direction for future research would be to investigate consumers' attitude towards unauthentic brands and brand stories, and whether this lessens the brands' credibility in the eyes of the consumers, or diminishes the formation of an emotional bond, or alternatively compare consumers' perceptions on authentic and unauthentic brand stories and their images constructed on the brands based on that.

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